

## A Black Stone in a Glass Box

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## A Black Stone in a Glass Box

by [Lomonaaeren](#)

### Summary

Harry has made a sacrifice to protect the wizarding world. And Draco Malfoy is going to find a way to reverse it if it kills him. After all, if he doesn't reverse it, then he'll only die of boredom anyway.

### Notes

This is based (very, very loosely) on the fairy tale of Koschei the Deathless, which is where the familiarity in the plot will probably come from. It's going to be an action/adventure and humor story more than a romance, mostly in Draco's POV, and although the first chapter is fairly dark, the rest are definitely lighter.

Warnings for deaths of animals, although in this case they're magical creatures made from objects.

## The Blue Book

“It doesn’t have to be this way.” Harry made sure to keep his voice deep and calm, though he couldn’t have persuaded himself to look away from the wand in Otto Cavendish’s hand for all the Galleons in the world. “The Ministry has rules in place to ensure fair treatment of even murderers. All you have to do is surrender and come with me, and I’ll make sure no one kills you.”

Cavendish laughed like a dying sewer rat. The wand in his hand didn’t waver. “Do you think I believe that, when one of the people I killed was your best friend?”

Harry would have rolled his eyes, except that that would probably count as looking away from the wand. “I told you, you didn’t kill him, simply put him in hospital. It’s not going to be a permanent injury, even. I’ll speak up for you. I’ll get you a comfortable holding cell. You like the comforts of life, don’t you?” he added coaxingly. From what they could tell, quite a few of Cavendish’s crimes had been committed because he wanted the luxuries that his victims had collected, and killing them was one of the few ways he could be certain that the original owners wouldn’t show up to claim them again.

“I might,” Cavendish said. “If I was going there. *Crucio!*”

Harry dodged the spell with an easy drop and spin, and came back up again, closer to Cavendish. He could feel the hair standing up on the back of his neck and his lungs rushing with air. His instincts urged him to strike, but his Auror training held him in check. He had to arrest this man if he could, not kill him, though since Cavendish had landed Ron and three other Aurors in St. Mungo’s, Shackbolt had given Harry tacit permission to do whatever he needed to do.

“It’ll be Azkaban for sure now,” Harry said, “thanks to the Unforgivables.”

Cavendish laughed. “I told you. I only worry about things that have a realistic chance of happening to me.” He lifted his wand, and Harry tensed, but no spell came out of it yet. Cavendish was aiming at the scar on his forehead now, and giving him a maniacal smile. “Harry Potter. You survived the Killing Curse once. Do you think you can do it again?”

Every muscle in Harry’s body was on edge, vibrating. No, he couldn’t block the Killing Curse, but he might be able to dodge it. Still, though, willingness to use this spell was one of the very few things that would make Aurors aim to kill instead of capture.

And he could see Ron’s injuries if he so much as blinked. No, they wouldn’t kill him, but they had been ugly and painful, and for one heart-sickening moment, Harry had been sure his best friend was dead.

*I can’t let that control me, he reminded himself. I have to follow the course of justice and do what’s best, not what I want to do.* He met Cavendish’s eyes and started to speak again, striving to find words that would repeat what he had already said but in new ways that might make Cavendish listen.

“*Avada Kedavra.*”

Harry dodged, and then saw Cavendish lifting his wand to aim at the roof of the cave.

Maybe he wasn't planning to bring it down on them. But he was jealous enough of his treasures that he might have decided that it was better that Harry die here, rather than possibly take his collection away from him.

It was enough of a judgment call for an Auror.

Harry struck to kill, and allowed himself not to think at all for five minutes afterwards.

\*

When he returned from his period of blankness, Harry shook himself and started trotting down the corridor towards what he already suspected was the location of Cavendish's treasure chamber. He would have to make at least a start on counting and cataloguing his finds, so that none of the inheritors would get the bright idea that he had stolen something and look to see how much money they could make by suing Harry Potter.

Besides, the Aurors encouraged simple, mindless work like this to get over the darkly necessary part of the job.

Harry stepped through the entrance and stopped with a blink. The cave floor below him dropped away in a series of smooth, waterfall-like steps, leading to a room that swept and swooped and opened its walls like wings.

There were treasures. Of course there were. Harry had expected that. But either Cavendish had had a substantial legacy of his own, or he had stolen more than Harry realized, because there were so *many* here. Harry's mind refused to comprehend the sheer number of trunks, shelves, ledgers, and piles of coins, statues, books, crystals, jewels, and other things; by the time that he looked at one part of the cavern, he had already forgotten what was lurking in another point of the compass.

As he stood there, dazed and wondering where to begin, a silent call reverberated in his mind.

Harry paused, his eyes narrowed. Surely none of these inanimate objects could have the power of Tom Riddle's diary—

But the call sounded again, a series of formless noises that remade themselves into words as Harry listened. *I rightfully belong to one who has defeated a Dark Lord.*

Harry picked his way through the coins, with them sliding underfoot like loose stones, until he reached a trunk that was half-open. Had Cavendish been here recently? Harry cast a few spells he'd helped develop that could locate fingerprints the way Muggle police did, and nodded as the marks of hands sprang into being on the iron hasps of the trunk. This could be a trap, the last thing Cavendish had touched before he had come to confront Harry.

*He could not touch me. I rightfully belong to one who has defeated a Dark Lord.*

Harry cast more spells before he reached into the trunk, because he wasn't a fool. Despite the large and roomy nature of the trunk, the only thing in it was a deep blue book, the color the sky sometimes turned at sunset. Harry didn't recognize the leather that bound it. It was hard and wrinkled, like wyvern skin, but he didn't think it was dyed.

He kept it floating in front of him as he used magic to flick through the pages. Yes, there were

stories about Dark Lords written there, including the story of Dumbledore's defeat of Grindelwald, which made Harry frown. From the appearance of the book, he had thought it older than that.

And then, on the last page, there was a picture of himself, and beneath that, a set of instructions that made him lean closer to the paper.

*There will be Dark Lords in the world, again and again, unless someone who has already defeated one makes the final sacrifice to ensure that they will never return.*

Harry paused, and swallowed, and swallowed again. Then he used the page-turning spell to slam the book's cover shut, and turned to the task he had come here to perform in the first place, creating an accurate list of the treasures Cavendish had bought and stolen.

\*

The book was not on the list that Harry had handed to Kingsley. Or, well, it was, but on a piece of parchment that at the last minute Harry slid into his sleeve. Now he was sitting at home, the book on a table in front of him, and his eyes unable to move from it, although the book hadn't "spoken" to him since its second declaration that it belonged to someone who had defeated a Dark Lord.

He didn't know that he believed what was written in there. *Cavendish* could have written it, for all that Harry knew. The handwriting didn't look like his, but it wasn't as though there weren't plenty of charms to disguise someone's handwriting.

And if the book was sentient and had come up with the words itself, or from a trapped spirit, the way Tom Riddle's diary had worked, that still didn't mean it was safe. The opposite, if anything. Harry leaned forwards, making another test, and let his hand rest on the blue leather of the cover. Then he turned to that last page and stared at the crude sketch of his own face.

Nothing happened. When Harry dipped a quill in ink and wrote on the blank page inside the back cover, *Hello?* there was no response. That made it unlikely to be a book like Tom Riddle's diary, at least.

*Or else the spirit trapped inside is smart enough not to answer back.*

Harry bit his lip hard enough to leave dents from his teeth. He didn't really believe in the book, no, but he was never going to get *anywhere* if he sat here staring doubtfully at it and refusing to read what it said on the last page. And putting it away and forgetting about it wasn't an option. Not if there was the smallest chance he could stop another Dark Lord from rising.

One hadn't, not since Voldemort, but not for want of trying. Harry and Ron had personally stopped no fewer than seven attempts to gather Death Eaters together and four rituals that might have produced a wizard with insanely powerful magic if they had worked as advertised. It hadn't seemed like a big deal at first. Someone inevitably betrayed the conspiracy, or the people who wanted to be Dark Lords were mad anyway, and not good at planning.

But Harry could see how the fear ate at the wizarding world, how many people looked back to Grindelwald and spoke of the period between him and Voldemort as just a lull in an endless war. And sometimes they received reports of a suicide, more often of an emigration, as wizards who couldn't stand the fear anymore fled the only way they could think of.

If there was the smallest *chance* that this was real, and he could prevent another Dark Lord from

rising...

Harry picked up the book, focused on the last page under his picture, and began to read.

\*

Harry stepped back from the circle he had made on the floor and squinted at the objects he'd placed on and inside it. Around the rim of the circle were a piece of quartz, a nugget of gold, a flat spoon that was genuine silver, a piece of blue satin almost the color of the book's cover, a pink rose, a scarlet leaf, a pale green stem from a plant growing in his garden, and a tuft of brown fur from Hermione and Ron's dog. In the center was a black stone, a single, round, smooth one that Harry had found in the lair of a Dark wizard and kept as a memento once the Ministry had confirmed there was nothing dangerous about it.

Beside the stone was a glass box, as long as one of his arms, with squat sides. Everything was exactly as it should be.

Harry paced around the circle again, his heart hammering hard. There was possibly no one else who would have understood the instructions the book gave him, or understood why they would work. The book was operating on the same theory that had allowed Voldemort to create the Horcruxes, except in reverse. Where the Horcruxes had been objects infused with a piece of soul, created by a murder, these would be objects infused with Harry's passion and emotion, created by the spilling of his own blood and his willing sacrifice.

And the sacrifice would not even take his life.

Harry crouched beside the circle and shut his eyes. His breathing calmed as he waited, and his hands ceased to tremble and instead hung straight down before him. When he opened his eyes again, he was floating in the middle of a tremendous calm like nothing he had known in years.

Did he want to do this? Yes.

Not because someone was forcing him to. Not because the book had enchanted him. Because he had inquired of Hermione if the magical theory was sound, under another name, and found it was, and because this was a small sacrifice to ease the wizarding world's fear.

The war hadn't ended things. Harry's world still lay under a shadow. He had been naive enough, when he killed Voldemort, to think that everyone would rejoice and come together, and that time would do what force couldn't.

It hadn't happened. The House rivalries in Hogwarts were worse than ever. The rumors of Dark Lords constantly circulated even when the Aurors couldn't find anything to substantiate them. Bribery was at an all-time high in the Ministry. And some pure-bloods had started to pull their children out of Hogwarts and their money away from any business or restaurant that a Muggleborn owned, or sometimes even where Muggleborns were admitted. Harry dreaded the day that started happening with something like St. Mungo's, where the whole community needed it.

Someone had to do something to stop it, to remove at least one source of fear. The spell in the book had promised that when Harry performed this ritual, then the rumors of Dark Lords would die down. Everyone would feel the reassurance flooding their souls that they should have felt when Voldemort died.

Harry had saved the world once. He *could* do it again, and at such a little cost. No one was even asking him to risk his life, or making him the subject of a prophecy.

He smiled a little, and stood up, facing the circle of salt and the black stone and glass box in the middle. He was ready.

He held his wand to his wrists, and cut them carefully with the spell that another book had recommended for when one wanted to shed blood but not in amounts that would incapacitate. Then he stooped and made the same cuts in his legs, equally careful to avoid the great arteries. Then the side of his neck. Then his forehead, above the curse scar. Then in the lobe of each ear.

And finally, he laid his wand above his heart and made the last cut. His chest bled only a little, bright scarlet blood trickling as Harry leaped across the circle and picked up the black stone, pressing it to his heart.

There was a flash deeper than an abyss, deeper than madness. Harry shut his eyes and swayed in the great wind that seemed to have sprung up about him, centering on his chest and the stone, the hard shape of it that pressed into the contours of his hand, the solid weight.

The stone absorbed the blood, and Harry felt the other objects glowing around the circle, felt the pressure of the light without being able to open his eyes. He was breathing slowly. He didn't remember when that had started. It was growing hard to remember anything at all.

But he turned, the stone still pressed to his heart, and the flowing blood arched away from his other wounds in steady streams, crossing the distance between his body and the objects. Harry opened his eyes, shaking with the effort, in time to see each drop of blood seal the eight objects scattered around the circle. The pink rose and the scarlet leaf turned a darker version of their own shades. The nugget of gold glowed phoenix colors. The silver spoon looked now as though someone had spilled strawberry juice on it, and the blue cloth had a crimson thread along the bottom--

That was all Harry had time to see before the force of the power behind his back drove him to his knees. He knelt there, swaying, his head bowed, and the magic behind him touched the objects and assembled them.

And drew something else out of him along with the blood.

Harry remembered the words he was supposed to speak, and managed to get his breath behind his lungs enough to speak them. He hoped vaguely that the time he was supposed to say them hadn't already passed. "I give my heart to the struggle to keep the world free of Dark Lords, as I did once before. I give my heart's blood. I *give my heart*."

The book had said that he needed to speak the last words with emphasis. That was no problem. Harry was shaking with passion and not magic now, and he felt the round black stone he clutched become warm.

The blood went on pouring out of him, and then abruptly all the cuts sealed themselves--Harry could see the skin writhing over them--except the one over his heart. Harry felt the stone and his heart reaching out to each other, and held his breath, then realized how silly that was and let it out sharply.

The stone glowed.

Harry opened his eyes, at the same moment as a severing blade seemed to descend in his mind. He could still see the stone, and see the other objects around the circle, no longer only objects, but animals in cages of glass. He could still feel the wonder that the ritual had worked, and the profound gladness that it had, and the worry of what his friends would think of this, if he ever told them.

But all those emotions were distant, ripples on the surface of the pond that his mind seemed to have become. They faded in seconds, and there was only calm, the resolve to do what he needed to do.

Harry stood up and placed the black stone tenderly in the glass box. When he closed the lid, magic sealed it. Harry cradled the box in his arms and Levitated the other glass cages into the air, cages that were home now to golden bird, brown dog, and other animals.

The book had said, *Whosoever gives his heart, fully and freely, to the struggle to defeat Dark Lords, shall achieve his desire. But he must thereafter guard the object that represents his heart from any interference. For, should it be taken and shattered, the ritual and the protection will be broken.*

That was fine, Harry thought. He would hide his heart somewhere safe, and the animals, magical creatures and not mortal, would serve as guardians to protect it. He would be left with the rest of his life without much passion, with irritation instead of fury, with fondness instead of love.

But wasn't that a small price to pay, to stem all the fear and all the grief? And who could change things now?

\*

Unknown to Harry, the person who could change things was stepping out of a Floo into Malfoy Manor, coming back to England for the first time in five years, and already complaining loudly of boredom.

# The Golden Mean

## *Chapter Two--The Golden Mean*

"I wish that you would find something to do outside the house, darling." An outsider, Draco thought, wouldn't have heard the faint thread of strain in his mother's voice as she tried to concentrate on her newspaper.

"I would," Draco said. "If I had any friends who weren't married, or if I could cast certain curses without the Aurors being interested in us." He contemplated the ceiling of the dining room and the new fresco that his mother had had made all along the top of the wall. That entertained him for about one minute. Great scenes from wizarding history weren't all that interesting to Draco when he'd had that history drilled into him from the time he could walk. "I'm *bored*," he announced again.

Narcissa finally lowered her paper and scowled at him. Draco fluttered his eyelashes back at her. His mother had been the one who wanted him to come home, who had told him that it was time to stop wandering around the world and take up his responsibilities. But she hadn't suggested a certain duty he could perform since he got here.

"*Please* find something to do," Narcissa said, her words clipped by her teeth.

Draco leaned forwards and did some more eyelash-fluttering. "You made it sound like there were *shiploads* of things waiting here for me to do them. You haven't said what they are yet. Did you forget?"

"You spit when you say shiploads," his mother said, and sipped from her cup of tea. "Please don't do it again."

Draco put his hand up to his mouth in spite of himself, and then lowered it and scowled when he saw Narcissa's faint smile. It was all very well for *her*, he thought. She was in that time of life when news and politics and money interested her. Draco was still exploring the limits of his magic, still learning what he could do and what he couldn't do, and sleeping with people and learning what different kinds of alcohol tasted like had been most of his life for the past year.

But he *could* be serious. He could learn to be serious, and a worthy heir, as his father would probably describe it. The problem was that both of his parents had seemed relieved when he left, and they had settled into the life of a sedate, childless couple. If Draco was supposed to be starting a serious life, so far, they hadn't shown him how he should do that. And their only suggestions were boring.

"No one mentions the war anymore," Narcissa murmured, without looking up from her paper this time. "I beg that you won't do so."

Draco blinked. "But what happens when you have to talk about someone who's dead? Or a family who lost a lot of prestige, like Pansy's?" Though, to be fair, Pansy's family wouldn't have lost so much if she hadn't chosen to give interview after interview lamenting her careless remark against Potter right before the Battle of Hogwarts. Other people would have let it die if she had. But she'd exploited the only half-hour of fame she was ever likely to have, and invitations had died for her



parents in consequence.

"We don't talk about them, dear." Narcissa gave him another bright smile, and rattled the paper pointedly. "And I do have something that you could do for us. Your father had a line on a sure thing in the Ministry--"

Draco muffled a groan. He'd heard his parents talk about this "sure thing" several times in the last fortnight. Apparently Lucius was confident he could ascend to a position of power behind the throne. The new Minister, Ivan Allenby, was richer in money than he was in friends. Someone who offered to show him the ropes, an older and wiser wizard who wasn't ambitious about being credited for his good ideas, might be received gratefully.

"But it turns out Allenby has rejected his advances, for some reason." Narcissa shook her head with a faint frown and laid her hand on the paper, over the photograph that bore the smiling Minister's face, as if that would make him less likely to hear what she was talking about. "He said that he no longer fears Dark Lords. Your father can't go to the Ministry in person to investigate what that means, of course. I think you might be able to, Draco."

Draco snorted and touched his left arm. "You think that my Mark is more faded than Father's? At least in the minds of those who care about that sort of thing in the first place?"

"I think," Narcissa said, her words weighted in the way that meant they were supposed to land in Draco's mind and create impressions that would change his thoughts, "that you have the reputation as a shallow playboy uninterested in politics. Your asking will be put down to boredom and a fleeting interest, not the service of your family. Do this," she added, with a significant glance, "and your father might think more about the Abraxan you wanted."

Draco smiled. That was blatant bribery, which meant they were back on ground he understood.

"An Abraxan *colt*, remember," he said, standing up. "The true colors. None of these blond unwashed coats."

"He'll remember," Narcissa said. "But going to the Ministry this morning would aid his memory."

Draco saluted her and swirled upstairs to pick out his fanciest cloak. Well, his fanciest cloak that he had brought to England, anyway. If he was going to play on his peacock reputation, he should look the part.

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Draco wandered through the Ministry, paused in beams of sunlight from enchanted windows that made his hair glow as if lit from within, flirted, chatted, laughed, nodded amiably to people who gaped at his Malfoy features, and understood what was going on inside an hour. His father could have done the same thing, if he had cultivated the disregard of people since the war instead of fighting sternly for some sort of *central* place in the wizarding world. Watching from the edges was so much more fun.

The Ministry had lived in fear of a Dark Lord since the end of the war. Draco could understand why. After all, they had left their own defense in the hands of a teenage wizard last time, and then had been invaded from the outside with relatively little effort. Resistance had been ineffective because too many people were compliant and afraid. If one mad overlord could look at a country like this and see it as ripe for the plucking, another could do the same thing.

But in the last fortnight, the rumors had stopped circulating, suspicions had begun to die, and people were now laughing loudly at the same gossip that they would have given breathless credence to a month ago. They didn't pay attention to the wizards who had built up reputations and fortunes playing on those fears.

And of course that was what Lucius had done. He'd tried to sell himself to Allenby as a reformed character, but also someone who had been close to a Dark Lord and understood the mindset that would make a wizard into one. It was an interesting tactic, and Draco had to admit that it would work in certain lights.

Either Allenby was smarter than Lucius had thought he was, or he was caught up in the same spreading of relief and relaxation that had infected the rest of the Ministry. Draco's money was on the latter. Which meant it was the truth, since he never bet on any wager he wasn't sure to win.

He could have gone home once he had that information. There was a soft bed calling his name, and a comfortable, house-elf-cooked meal. His mother would probably listen intently and go away to do something else, and Draco could nap without anyone calling him lazy or annoying another person with his complaints about boredom for a while.

But this was more interesting than any other gossip he'd heard since he came back to England-- certainly more interesting than the state of babies' nappies, which was all his married friends seemed to talk about. So he floated around the Ministry some more, and listened, and tried to determine where the change in attitude had come from.

No one seemed to know.

Draco paused in the corner of a corridor near the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and thought about it. Wasn't *that* curious, and somewhat entertaining? Most people seemed to assume that someone else had done something that others had found out about, and that was the reassurance. That was the source.

But with most rumors, there was more substance. Draco had heard wild ideas about everything from horses that could run as fast as dragons to the best means to destroy Muggles forever, and embellishment and details were the name of the game. Someone had stolen the board here, and disguised the pieces. It was the anti-rumor.

Draco wanted to know more.

He thought for a moment, and then smiled. There was one person that would probably be at the center of any notion about Dark Lords, and who might be able to confirm it for him. Draco headed into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in search of Harry Potter.

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Who seemed to be nowhere to be found.

Draco thought he must be out on a case at first, but then he wandered multiple corridors, listening, and found no sign of any of that. All Aurors liked cases and discussing them, whether or not those cases were theirs. Draco was sure he would have known in a minute where Potter was and who he was following, if he had been.

But no, instead the Aurors Draco listened to talked about other cases and other people and the Ministry's likely policies on things too boring to memorize until Draco wanted to drown himself in his tea. He put down the cup and walked straight for the lifts this time, shaking his head. He had found out enough to satisfy his parents. He would be back tomorrow.

Then he leaned into a small office he'd mistaken for the bathroom and saw that unmistakable broom-head of hair bent over a desk.

Draco licked his lips and felt his heart spring to life, with a swiftness that surprised him. He'd missed a lot of people while he was gone, including some he used to enjoy tormenting, but Potter was never on the list. Draco had to think about things like *gratitude* around him, and that was uncomfortable. Draco's philosophy in life was to avoid discomfort whenever possible. It had worked out well for him.

But here Potter was, and here Draco was, and it seemed fated. Draco stepped into the office and shut the door casually behind him.

Potter looked up.

Draco paused. Something was wrong, a realization that made his heart bound the way that seeing Potter's bowed head had. The problem was, he had no idea *what*. Potter looked the same as ever, down to those awful glasses that you'd have thought the Ministry would have made him abandon.

He nodded to Draco and said, "Take a wrong turn, Malfoy? The bathrooms are two doors down." And he signed his name to the paper in front of him, shoved it into a folder, and stood up, walking past Draco to the door as though he assumed Draco would let him through without a confrontation.

Draco, wavering, stuck an arm out in front of him. Potter halted there and looked at him like a particularly patient goat. Draco shook his head. "Aren't you happy to see me?" was the first taunt that made it out of his mouth.

"I don't know why I should be, because the last time I saw you was at the trials," Potter said. "And the last thing I heard, you were wandering around Europe. Probably causing all sorts of trouble for Aurors in other countries."

But he said it without interest, as though Draco was just an item on a list. Draco blinked. Of course it made sense that Potter would pursue more glamorous and dangerous criminals than Draco had ever been, but none of *them* had been Potter's boyhood rival. Potter ought to have tensed up and worried that Draco would make a cutting remark about weasels, at least.

"What's wrong with you?" Draco asked, seeing no reason to dance around the subject the way he would have with his family or friends.

"I'm late delivering this report." Potter reached past him for the door, sticking his arm under Draco's.

Draco leaned on the door this time, and Potter turned his head to look at him. But the anger didn't go *deep* enough in his eyes, somehow. It flashed and died out, like a spark falling from the fire instead of the true flame that would have burned there, and Potter turned and walked over to the hearth in the corner of the room.

"I reckon I'll have to deliver it by Floo," Potter said, and bent down to cast powder into the flames.

Draco gaped at him. Then he said, “No, seriously, what the fuck is *wrong* with you, Potter? You never would have taken that kind of insult from me, once.”

“That was when I didn’t have more important things to worry about,” Potter said, and faced the flames. “Head Auror’s office.” He cast a few spells on the folder, presumably to protect it from fire during the ride.

Draco didn’t think, because not thinking had also worked out well for him, for the most part. He strode forwards, waited until Potter had bent down again to fit his head under the mantle, and then kicked him in the arse.

Potter staggered, catching himself before he pitched forwards into the fire, but only just. He turned around, staring at Draco and shaking his head. There was a slight question in his eyes, a question that could become anger. Draco remembered the cousins of that demand in Potter’s face during their sixth year. He spread his hands and smiled, ready to go for his wand if he had to.

Again the flash of emotion spent itself and died. Potter sighed, said, “You always were a child, Malfoy,” and threw the powder again.

Draco cast an idle spell that whirled up a little breeze and dissipated the powder before it hit the flames. Potter was left staring at nothing but an ordinary hearth.

“You’re an *idiot*.”

No passion in his voice. No intention to curse Draco, it seemed. Potter sounded as weary as Draco’s parents sometimes sounded when they spoke of or to him, though of course without the love that Narcissa and Lucius put into their smallest word.

And that was the most exasperating thing Draco had discovered since he came back to England.

He snatched up Potter’s Floo powder and smashed the bowl, sending the powder drifting all over the floor. When Potter reached for his wand to charm it to come near him, Draco scattered it, stamped on it, and scraped his foot in it so that most of the powder clung to his boots and robes. There would be a job of cleaning on them both to do later, but that was one reason Draco had house-elves.

Potter stared at him, his wand motionless at his side. Again the spark of irritation in his eyes, again the fading.

Draco nodded. This time, he was *sure*, as sure he had been that all rumors about Dark Lords ceasing had been unnatural. Potter was under a curse, and it made sense that that was linked to the rumors vanishing, because Potter had been the last one to defeat a Dark Lord, and involved in preventing other people from becoming them. So someone was probably making an evil plan, and had enchanted Potter not to care about things, to ensure he stayed out of it.

Well, Draco didn’t plan on letting things rest like that. He reached out and grasped Potter’s wrist, tugging him to the door.

“What are you doing?” Potter’s voice spiked at the beginning of the sentence, but was flat and dead by the end. He didn’t try to escape as Draco opened the door and scanned for people nearby before he herded Potter towards the lifts.

“You’ve been cursed,” Draco said. “I’m going to find out what it is and what I can do to reverse it.”

“You don’t have to. It doesn’t affect your family.”

Draco closed his lips into a smile. He wouldn’t betray his father’s ambitions to Potter, but he had to admit he was looking forward to doing this for reasons that had nothing to do with what he had discovered about Dark Lords, and nothing to do with what Lucius wanted.

“But it affects my boredom,” he said, and got Potter to the lifts without anyone stopping them. Potter didn’t fight, either, only leaned on the wall of the lift and looked at Draco with blank, still eyes.

*There’s got to be a golden mean of serving my family and contenting myself at the same time, and I may have found it.*

## A Brown Study

“There’s something wrong with you.”

Draco had sat Potter down on a chair in front of the fireplace to explain this fact of life to him. So far, Potter hadn’t disputed it. He simply held still, staring at the flames as though he could see the future in them. Draco had seen less concentrated attention by Seers who *could*.

“There’s something wrong with you,” he repeated, when he realized that his first words hadn’t caught Potter’s attention the way they should have.

Potter glanced at him, and turned away again, back to the flames. “Why do you care?” he asked, and his voice held something that might have been indignation, draining steadily as Draco listened, so that the last word didn’t have the emphasis it should have, and sounded all wrong for it.

Draco shook his head. “Because your curse probably has something to do with the way someone’s trying to suppress rumors of Dark Lords, and the last one we had nearly stole my youth and beauty from me. I don’t want another one to rise, thanks. Or at least they can only do it after I’m dead,” he added, in fairness to any Dark Lords who might deserve to conquer the world.

“No one cursed me,” Potter said, and stood up, although it looked like he practically had to pull himself out of the chair by its back in order to do it. “That’s all. Thank you for being concerned. You can let me go home now.” He turned towards the door of the study.

Draco stepped in front of him. “You’re acting unnaturally. Has anyone said anything about it to you?”

Potter stared at him. “Who would? I’m fine.”

Draco hated the dissonance between the way those words sounded and the way they *should* have sounded in his head, strong and confident and spitting fire. “I can’t believe none of your friends have noticed. What would they say if I went and questioned them?”

“I don’t know what they would say, except to get out.” Potter looked at him in that infuriating way he had, as if he stood on top of a mountain and Draco was just some small and squeaking rodent at the bottom of it. “Ron still hates you. Hermione might give you a chance, but she wouldn’t listen to anything you said against me.”

All said like facts. Draco clenched his fists, and discovered he was biting his tongue. He tried to stop. Potter had never mattered this much to him, even if Draco had liked tormenting him and had reason to be grateful to him.

But then, Potter had never acted like this, either. Facts and Potter didn’t get along. *Passion* and Potter did.

“They must have noticed,” Draco said, and wondered if he could get Potter to cooperate if he asked about facts. “Tell me what they’ve said to you in the last fortnight about this.” A fortnight was about the period of time that the rumors had started dying in, so it made sense that Potter had been cursed around then.

Potter blinked, but replied in the same still tone that Draco thought he would use in a report to an Auror superior. “They haven’t said much, lately. Ron has been busy with the new partner he was assigned to, and Hermione has been busy fighting for new rights for werewolves. I haven’t seen Andromeda and Teddy. I’m too busy.”

“With *what*? Languishing?” Draco snapped, although he found it hard to imagine Potter doing that, either.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” Potter said, and gave him a distant frown.

“What the fuck are you busy with?” Draco said, lowering his voice. “Because I can’t imagine they’d let you out on cases, seeing the way you behave.”

“They’re very happy about the way I behave,” Potter said, his eyes straying past Draco to the fireplace. He didn’t make the dash for it that Draco would once have expected, though. “I’m less volatile than before, and I obey the rules now. I’ve finally grown up.”

“I bet that’s what someone wants them to think, and it *does* make a convenient excuse,” Draco said, and moved back, aiming his wand at Potter’s face.

For a moment, Potter tensed, and then the stiffness melted out of him, as though he didn’t know how to control his own reactions anymore. “I feel nervous with you pointing a wand at me,” he said, in defiance of all apparent truth.

Draco ignored him. Potter wasn’t under the Imperius Curse, but Draco wouldn’t be surprised if this spell was a close cousin of it. Someone wanted Potter utterly insensible to the danger happening to him, and that made this a good choice.

“*Revelo medicamenta*,” he murmured.

Potter only stood there as the spell hit him, blinking a little. The magic coiled around his body as a scarlet snake, moving from his shoulders up to his face. Draco watched closely. If it was a curse affecting the brain, the snake should glow around Potter’s shoulders and neck.

But it didn’t. It moved down, further, and circled around Potter’s chest, and still didn’t flare—until it got to the level of his heart. Then it began to dance madly, and circled several times before Draco banished it and stepped closer.

*A curse affecting the heart?* But spells like that didn’t *literally* affect the beating of the heart, and Draco didn’t think a spell that did would have produced all the results the last fortnight had, with the rumors of the Dark Lord dying and Potter retreating into this shell. A spell that affected the emotions and had a ritual component might, though.

“Let me see your chest,” he said, and reached out, using his wand to create a neat slit in Potter’s shirt above his heart.

Potter raised a hand, too late, as if he would stop him, but Draco had already shoved the shirt aside and was staring at what it revealed. There was a wound above Potter’s heart, a recent one. It had healed neatly, which made Draco wonder about the people who had cast the curse. Did they care that much about Potter, or were they just worried about getting caught?

(For a moment, Draco entertained a hopeful vision of Weasley or one of Potter's other friends doing something like this, taking care to heal the wound, and imagined exposing them and getting them the punishment they deserved. He had to admit it wasn't very likely, though).

"Can you tell me about who did this to you?" Draco asked, leaning in closer to see the cut. Yes, it was a small, thin line now, to the point Draco might not have noticed it if Potter was standing naked in front of him. Potter was tugging the sides of his shirt together to cover the cut, but almost absently, as though he couldn't remember why he was supposed to be concerned about wearing clothing.

"No one did it to me," he said. "I did it to myself."

Draco's eyes snapped up to Potter's face. *He could be joking. Or whoever cast the curse could have ordered him to say that.*

Then he remembered the way the spell he'd cast had glowed around Potter, and his mouth tightened. A ritual component, yes. He could think of any number of rituals that might rely on blood taken from the heart, but it was true that the most powerful rituals used the willing sacrifice of such blood. And the magic of the rituals didn't count "willing" compliance like that obtained with the Imperius Curse as powerful enough. Wasn't Potter supposed to be immune to the Imperius Curse, anyway? Draco remembered hearing about something like that.

"What did you do?" Draco asked. "Why?"

Potter frowned and seemed to consider, but apparently the ritual had dulled his emotions to the point that he didn't think it was dangerous to confess what he had done to Draco, either. "I found a ritual in an old book, one that said someone who had defeated a Dark Lord could keep them from ever coming back to the wizarding world if did a few things. Enchanted an object into his heart, and then used the same magic and the blood to make other objects into guardians for his heart."

Draco licked his lips. That particular ritual sounded familiar, though he'd never heard anything about it being used to defeat Dark Lords. But it would account for Potter's dulled emotions, his slowed reactions.

"You don't understand why someone might object to you making a sacrifice like that?" Draco asked. "Because I can think of lots of people who would object to it, your friends most of all."

"They wouldn't," Potter said, with a little shake of his head that seemed weary, as if he thought that shaking his head over something like this was too much effort. "They know I defeated the last Dark Lord, but that wasn't enough, because of all those rumors swirling around. No one was getting any peace, because those rumors wouldn't *let* them have peace. I made the necessary sacrifice."

Draco leaned his forehead into his palms and contemplated his feet for a few seconds. He didn't want to take Potter somewhere—if there was even any place he *could* take him with him suffering the way he was—with a bloody nose.

He looked up again when Potter moved towards the door, though. "Where do you think *you're* going?" Draco snapped, stepping into the way.

He got that vague, distant look from Potter again, as though he couldn't imagine why Draco would object. "Back to work."



“This ritual has made you less *fun*,” Draco said firmly. “Fun for me as well as your friends, I would imagine, although I’m the only one who really matters.” He saw the way Potter’s eyes started to flash, but this time, the spark seemed to die even faster. Maybe he got used to people who tried to anger him and they could only go so far into his dim emotions. That horrified Draco, and he decided to push further. “How do you reverse the ritual?”

Potter blinked. “You can’t.”

“Oh, bollocks,” Draco said. “I *know* you didn’t pursue Dark wizards for as long as you have without finding out all rituals can be reversed. You might not be willing to pay the price for it, but I could find a way to make the price matter less.”

Potter stood there stolidly thinking about it. Draco finally tapped him on the back of the head. “Where did you put your heart? Or the object that represents it?”

“In a secret place,” Potter said.

Draco sighed. He had *thought* that the ritual probably wouldn’t make Potter more prone to babble his secrets, but he had to check, didn’t he? “Tell me how we can get it back and smash it.” That was the only way to render someone who was immortal mortal, in old stories, and in this case, probably the only way to return Potter to life.

But Potter shook his head and gazed at Draco with an emotion that might have been pity before it died stillborn. “I did this to protect the world. I won’t let you destroy that protection. That would just bring all the rumors and the attempts to become Dark Lords flooding back.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Draco said. “What do you think will happen when you die?”

Potter blinked and apparently gave the question serious thought. “I’m not sure. The book didn’t emphasize that. But I think the protection for the world would at least endure a bit longer. That makes it worthwhile to keep up.”

“No one would *ever* have asked this of you,” Draco said, and his voice sounded rough enough that he paused and started over. He wouldn’t want Potter thinking Draco was upset for any reason but his stupidity. “You did your duty, as much as they can ask of anyone. And your friends are going to be upset when they notice.”

“People would have asked it,” Potter said simply. “They were asking it. All the ones who thought it was a good idea for me to go to the site of any ritual or any Death Eater meeting.”

Draco’s scowl got worse as he thought about that. Yes, Potter was right. A wizarding world that lived in fear would look for a hero to save them from it.

He *wished* Potter wasn’t right.

But it still didn’t mean he was right about anything other than the fact that some people would ask him. And the wishes of those who would sincerely want Potter to do something like this, as opposed to those who wanted him to be safe and would be horrified when they found out, were too stupid to be worth heeding.

“I’m going to find the object and break it,” he told Potter.

Potter stared at him, then shook his head. “You wouldn’t have the first clue as to where to start looking.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Feeling immensely better now that Potter had challenged him about something, Draco took a step towards the door, watching Potter intently. “What about in one of the places that you found the Dark Lord’s Horcruxes in?”

Potter’s wand ripped out. Draco licked his lips and opened his mouth, ready to protest his innocence, ready to raise his hands in the air and accuse Potter of being a horrible bigoted Auror...

And then Potter lowered his wand again and looked at it as though he didn’t know where it had come from, shaking his head. “I’m getting old,” he muttered.

Draco took a stiff step towards the idiot, then made himself stop and close his eyes. If he took Potter’s wand at this point, he’d probably snap it, and there were certain levels of trouble that he didn’t need to get into.

Instead, he spent a long few moments contemplating the wall, and then turned around and looked evenly at Potter, who hadn’t moved but continued to gaze at his wand as though it held all the secrets he’d ever need. “I know about the Horcruxes because I met a few people that *he* contacted for research materials while I was abroad,” Draco said quietly. “It isn’t something I would have wanted to talk about, but you get the right people drunk, and they’ll confess all the sins you never wanted to know.”

Potter looked up. “As long as you didn’t make any of your own, I suppose it’s okay.”

Draco’s fingers itched. They often did that when he wanted a drink, or when he wanted to strangle someone. It was remarkable how similar the sensations could be.

He shook his head, managed to pull himself back into the present, and said, “What if I were to tell you there’s an even more effective ritual for blocking the return of Dark Lords, one that you can use multiple times, and which won’t end with your life the way this one might?”

Potter took a long, hungry step forwards, then stopped as if he thought that might frighten Draco off. It would in certain circumstances, which this one was, Draco thought sourly. Potter’s gaze remained nailed to Draco’s face, though. “Tell me.”

Draco gave a slight, sarcastic bow. “Well, it will take a bit of explaining.” Translation: Draco would need some time to make up the details of the ritual he had just invented. “But I know that it can’t work if another ritual is in effect. That means you would have to get rid of this one first.”

Potter hesitated. His eyes still didn’t look right, but Draco was willing to accept a lot of shit at this point just to get past Potter’s initial emotionlessness.

“I thought you said that you’d never heard of anything like this,” Potter mumbled. “That book was old, and the ritual was only available to someone who’d defeated a Dark Lord. What about this ritual? What if it’s the same way?”

Draco looked at him evenly, and ignored the savage pounding of his heart in his chest. “The only way you can be sure of that is to come with me, and try this other ritual. But we need to break yours first.”

Potter hesitated again, long enough that Draco thought he might see through the lie. But Potter's stupidity as well as his lack of emotions seemed increased by what he'd done to himself. He nodded and held out his hand.

"The first obstacle to get through is a long way from here," he said. "I made all the objects I enchanted into different magical creatures, and each one guards the clue or the key that you need to get past the next one."

Draco shook his head as he accepted Potter's hand. He was starting to wonder if he had gone a little far in his longing to wake Potter up. "How do you defeat the first one, then?"

"You just have to fight," Potter replied, and began to lead Draco towards the door, towards the outside of the Manor, where they could Apparate.

Draco went along, watching his back. It sounded like this journey would be uncomfortable and tiring. And he had avoided discomfort for so long.

*But if I walk away from this, I have to endure the discomfort of seeing Potter like this for the rest of his life. Because his stupid friends might find out the truth, but they would never be able to do anything about it. They're too stupid.*

Draco sighed and straightened his back. Okay, he could do this.

And it would at least put paid to his boredom.

Suddenly more cheerful, he followed Potter out of the Manor.

## The Golden Bird

“This is the most desolate place I could imagine.”

Draco scanned the landscape in front of them, and had to agree. He didn’t actually know where they were, although he reckoned it was still in England. A series of small hills rose up in front of them, black as though charred by fire, with the short grass giving way to stone halfway up the sides. And in front of them was a tiny cave.

“Where did you learn about this place?” he asked, sniffing as he followed Potter towards the cave. There was no trace of that rotting scent that the Dark Lord had carried with him, and Draco relaxed a little. He had never known where that scent came from, any more than he knew the real location of this cave, but he suspected it was a mingling of stale sweat and snake vomit.

“One of my cases,” Potter said, which made Draco roll his eyes. Yes, Potter might have given him that uninformative an answer on purpose when he was himself, but he would have done it with a little sneer, or at least turned his head back over his shoulder to watch Draco’s reaction. *This* Potter kept his head aimed forwards, his expression not so much solemn as blank.

*I need to wake him back up for the sake of everyone. Not just me, but think of all the criminals he would otherwise chase who would feel that a real hero hadn’t caught them.*

The cave was even smaller than Draco had originally thought, a dark opening into darkness. Draco wrinkled his nose at the thought of crawling into it. At least Potter was with him, so Draco could make *him* crawl into it.

Potter halted a few meters from the cave and swayed back and forth on his feet, blinking as he stared at the entrance. Draco reached out to put a hand on his shoulder, although he didn’t know why Potter would require his support *now*.

The darkness at the cave entrance stirred.

A moment later, shining so brightly that Draco wondered how he could possibly have missed it—although he supposed that was part of what came along with being a *magical* creature—a golden bird burst into the air from the cavern. It climbed rapidly, and then hovered on broad wings over their heads, shrieking at them, so it was a long minute before Draco could get a good look at it.

It was about the size of a phoenix, but its feathers were metallic, the real color of burnished gold, instead of the bright scarlet and orange that a phoenix’s would flame. Neither was there any trace of blue or white. Draco could make out the fringes to its feathers, the crest like sunrays that flared around its head, the brilliant eyes like polished gems. It made sense that whatever object Potter had enchanted into this bird would make it look nothing like any earth bird.

Not that he intended to let that stop him. Potter’s future and Draco’s future entertainment were still more important than any beauty.

He could think of several people in Paris who would be shocked to hear him say that, and the memory warmed him as he turned back to Potter’s cold face.

“How do we get it down?” he asked. “Or do we have to kill it?” The rituals and fairy stories he had heard of that resembled what Potter had done to himself had included killing at least a few guardians of the magical, hidden heart, he thought.

Potter tilted his head back and watched the bird for long moments. Then he said, “You have to fight it and kill it.” But his voice trailed off into softness, and a second later he shook his head and brushed his wand against his thigh as though it was a quill. “I think. I don’t know. I don’t remember. The person I was before the ritual was—different.”

“And you think there’s *nothing wrong* with what you did,” Draco muttered.

Potter frowned at him. “I was a different person because I wasn’t shouldering the burdens that I should have,” he said, and if anything could give his voice conviction, Draco suspected it was this. “What did I think would happen after I defeated Voldemort? That the whole world would just fall neatly in line? That Death Eaters would *go away*?” He shook his head. “I didn’t think of the long-term consequences of my actions. I should have.”

Draco just looked at him, and said nothing, because saying something would probably involve punching Potter, and Potter probably wouldn’t stand still for that. It was amazing what he *had* already stood still for, though. Draco reckoned that the dulling of his emotions had probably also dulled his sense of long-term consequences.

*Instead of punching me, he might moralize at me about what factors in my life caused me to do that.*

And the thought of *that* sent Draco turning around to look at the bird again. It still hovered above them, and screamed the minute Draco’s eyes fell on it, lifting its crest aggressively and shaking its head back and forth. The feathers spread out around it like flames.

Draco nodded. “I can do this,” he said to no one in particular. “Just fight it and kill it.”

He lifted his wand and sent up a Stunner. That would knock the bird to the ground, and that would make killing it much easier. Draco had no fancy to try and slaughter it on the wing.

The bird swirled easily aside from the curse, and then flapped its wings hard. Draco wondered for a minute if it was going to fly away, and cursed himself for not bringing a broom so he could follow it.

Then the bird startled him by flying down straight at *him*, slender claws outstretched and aiming for his eyes. Draco swore and ducked away, and felt the claws skim across his head, raking shallow furrows in his scalp, before the bird circled up and came around for another pass.

“Oh, yes, it tries to defend itself,” Potter murmured. “I had forgotten that part.”

Draco didn’t say anything to him, because the words didn’t exist that were eloquent enough. Instead, he clutched his wand in his hand and watched the way the bird turned and swerved. If he knew how it flew, the way it attacked, then he might be able to come up with ways to take it down.

It flew like a hawk, faster than it should have with those long, tapered wings and claws that extended the way they did, and otherwise any way it wanted to, Draco thought. It was much closer to him than he had thought it would be by the time he straightened up, and once again he had to duck, although this time he at least raised a Shield Charm around himself.

The bird's claws hit the Shield Charm, and shattered it.

Draco shouted and barely made it out of the way, again, but this time the bird's claws would have damaged his eye if they had come a centimeter closer. He rose to his feet and watched it come back around again with his heart and his magic pounding in his chest.

"You didn't think to mention to me that it could *break* magic?" he murmured to Potter.

Potter was watching him with a wrinkled brow. The bird hadn't come near him, Draco noted bitterly, or given any sign that it had noticed him. "You didn't ask," Potter said.

Draco shook his head in disgust. He thought he knew what had happened. The ritual had taken away Potter's instincts for self-defense, or maybe simply *self-preservation*, and dulled his natural responses to Draco. But it had done the same for danger, and had made him depend too much on logic and facts. And it was a fact that Draco hadn't asked him that about the bird.

"Tell me what else it can do," he said, and backed up in front of the bird's next strike. It had been deliberately too short, Draco thought, as if the creature was testing his readiness. That made it a much more intelligent opponent than he had wanted to face. "I'm asking now," he added, when Potter hesitated.

"But I don't think I should tell you now," Potter said, shaking his head. "The ritual that you told me about might not be as good as this one after all."

Draco grimaced. *A fine time for Potter to remember that he used to distrust me.*

He had other facts to deal with, though. Like the bird, and the fact that it could avoid most of his spells and break the rest.

He felt something odd happen to his mouth, and reached his hand up, wondering if the bird had caused some kind of change with magic that he hadn't seen. In some shock, he explored the shape of the smile that had appeared there with his fingers.

*I'm not bored.*

There was that, at least, and it was enough that Draco laughed, and looked up at the golden bird circling over him, and saw it hesitate and peer at him as if it distrusted him, along with Potter.

"Well, you should," Draco said aloud, jogging his wand in his hand as he thought of the spell that he would use to kill the bird. "I'm going to be the one that destroys you, when you thought no one could do that. Because you thought no one would make it this far and actually know what they had to do to free Potter, did you?"

Just as it occurred to him that perhaps it was a *bit* mental to talk that way to a magical bird that had already struck at him twice, the bird began another dive, wings and feet both set wide apart. The claws on the ends of those wicked talons sparked and cast dazzling shadows around Draco's face.

Draco lifted his wand slowly. The spell he had thought of was effective, but it needed to be launched close at hand. Otherwise, the bird would only dodge, and the next time, it would be even warier about coming close to Draco.

The bird screamed aloud when it saw the way Draco's wand rose. Draco thought it probably hoped he was wounded and wouldn't be in time to stop it. It did seem a vicious little thing, without the moral lessons Draco had learned in the last five years: namely, that wishing harm on your enemy was only boring, and less productive than going out and enjoying yourself.

*How much can it enjoy itself when it's bound to Potter's cave and guarding Potter's heart, though?*

Draco didn't have enough time to answer that. The bird was right in front of him now, and its wings had narrowed down to swoop in between his arms.

Draco cast. "*Tarantallegra!*"

He heard Potter snort behind him. Part of him must have recognized the silliness of Draco's spell, and the bird seemed to, the way it shrieked in contempt and aimed its claws directly at Draco's eyes.

But the hex was on-target, and that meant more to Draco right now than anyone's opinions about how *sophisticated* his spellwork was. It crashed into the bird, and the bird screamed and snapped its neck back and forth, beak working furiously, as it began to jerk in the air, legs and wings sticking out and wagging in different directions. It couldn't fly anymore, and it fell to the ground, still kicking and clawing at the ground like a demented chicken after sideways insects.

Draco stepped up to it. He would have enjoyed his triumph, maybe even made a little victory speech, but the bird's beak nearly took a chunk out of his leg. Draco nodded, and cast another spell that he had seen some people in Spain use to stop a chicken's heart painlessly. There was no reason it shouldn't work on a magical creature, too.

It did. The bird's head drooped into the dirt, and its scarlet beak opened and then just lay there. The life left its eyes. Draco watched that, to make sure of it. The last thing he wanted was to have the bird revive and land on his back. Those claws looked like they could do some damage, to his clothes as well as his skin.

The bird shimmered, and where it had been, there was nothing in the dirt but a nugget of gold. Draco blinked. Well, a nugget of gold wasn't *nothing*, but it was less impressive than the free, proud creature that had attacked him.

He nudged the nugget with his boot, and turned it over. There was something under it, perhaps the last remnant of the bird as a bird. He stooped and picked it up. A long, single golden feather, of the kind that a bird would probably have on the edges of its wings. A flight feather, Draco remembered it was called after a brief struggle. Well, he didn't have much use for the words in his day-to-day life.

*If this is be my new and more exciting life, I might have some use for it.*

He turned around with the feather in his fingers, and paused when he saw Potter. The man was staring at him with an open mouth, perhaps because Draco had defeated the bird, perhaps because he hadn't expected him to use such a simple spell to do it. Then he shut his mouth, but his eyes remained the same: wide and alive.

*Alive.* There was a bit of passion to them now, which hadn't been there for more than a second before.

Draco smiled. “You set it up as a chain ritual, didn’t you, Potter?” he whispered, spinning the feather between his fingers. “Not a simple set of guardians, the way you first described it to me. Your salvation and your emotions don’t depend on just finding and smashing your heart. Instead, each creature I kill opens up a bit more of your heart.” He took in a breath he thought would come out as words, but it ended up as deep laughter instead. “This is going to be more fun than I thought,” he added, when he could get his breath back.

Potter shook his head, slowly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Malfoy.”

Draco clucked his tongue. “You might not know the technical term for the kind of ritual you used—which I can well believe since you were stupid enough to do it to yourself in the first place—but that’s what it is. And you’ve already told me enough to let me know this feather must be the first key.” He held it up.

Potter watched him, blinking long and hard, as though he was struggling against the perception Draco was trying to force on him. Then he put a hand over his eyes, and wiped briskly up and down. “I don’t—I feel like part of me is buried in sludge,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Part of my *brain*.”

Draco smiled and inclined his head. “That makes sense. I think the ritual has affected you in ways you can’t acknowledge to yourself yet. But I will follow the chain, and undo it link by link.” He studied Potter for a moment, the hair that bristled as he shook his head and the bewildered look in his eyes as he lowered his hand. “Yes, now you look more like yourself.”

“Because I’m confused.” Potter struggled to say it as a perfectly factual statement, the way he would have before, and ended up scowling at Draco uncertainly.

Draco nodded. “Because you have some *emotion* on your face. You don’t realize how much passion is part of someone’s life, and the way you think of them and comprehend them, until it’s gone.”

“You’re not making sense,” Potter said, with a fragile dignity that Draco found infinitely more appealing than the more solid façade he’d been wearing an hour ago. “And I think that you should tell me about the ritual you promised could secure the wizarding world against Dark Lords.” He shook his head again a second later and touched his forehead where the scar lingered.

Draco smiled. “Why would I do that? I don’t know yet how hard this chain ritual of yours is going to be to break, and I’ll have to do all the fighting, since you won’t help me. You don’t get your side of the bargain fulfilled until I have *all* of mine.”

A statement like that wouldn’t have baffled the ordinary Potter for a second, but this one hesitated, then nodded. “All right,” he said. “That feather should tell you the way to the next part.” He peered at the feather as if there was writing on the barbs that he could read.

Draco clucked his tongue again. “What, you don’t remember the steps along the road to your heart? How childish. I suppose I’ll have to do this on my own, and that means you’ll never know about the other ritual you could have used.” He turned his back and walked towards the point where Potter had Apparated them in.

He counted five seconds before Potter called after him, “All right, Malfoy. The feather is what will let you defeat the next creature. I’ll take you there.”



Draco walked back to him and held out his hand for Potter's arm, saying sweetly, "How kind you are. How farseeing, to want to guard the wizarding world past your death." He patted Potter's shoulder. "If you take me to the next point, we'll be a step closer to destroying a shield of paper and putting a shield of steel in its place."

Potter squinted at him, but apparently couldn't make out whether Draco was actually joking or not. *Of course not*, Draco thought, meeting his eyes. *He destroyed the part of him that could have comprehended it.*

As they vanished, Draco hoped the next battle would be harder, because that would mean the reward was greater: a bigger spark in Potter's eyes, a harder smile or sneer or some other emotion beyond confusion.

*I never realized how much I would miss him until he was gone.*

## The Brown Dog

This time, they came out in a forest so humid Draco had to sit down on a rock and cast a spell to clear his lungs. He blinked at the trees around them, for once convinced that they weren't in England anymore and intercontinental Apparition might be possible. Well, for someone like Potter, anyway.

*I should have had him with me during all those tiresome Floo journeys in France.*

But as he stared, he saw the telltale wavering of the tree trunks, and the way some of the bright green leaves trembled a little, and smiled. This was illusion, probably from spells cast by Potter to protect this particular guardian. Good job on the humidity and the wetness of a jungle, though, Draco thought, watching one particular fat drop of moisture slide down the slender branch in front of him.

"Malfoy?"

Draco blinked and looked up. Potter stood in front of him with his hands on his hips, staring down. There was a sound of his teeth grinding which Draco blinked at again, and then he smiled and lounged back on the rock.

"What?" he asked. "I was recovering from the Apparition. You don't know how *strong* you are, Potter." He used the purring inflection on "strong" that he would have used with Aoife back in Germany, and had the satisfaction of watching Potter's face flush. "I might stay here for a while. I haven't felt a seat this comfortable in—"

"You said you wanted to find the next link in the chain," Potter said, no, *snapped*, and reached for Draco's wrist. "That means you have to come *on*."

Draco let himself be hauled to his feet, and swayed a little before he could focus. "I thought the ritual took your heart," he said.

Potter dropped his wrist as though Draco had cast a Stinging Hex at his fingers and stared at his hand. Draco smiled. *Yes, it's all the hand's fault, isn't it? If you can blame your heart and your magic and the rest of you for acting independently of you, then you might be able to excuse yourself.*

Then Potter turned and glared at him as if he had heard the thought, and Draco reminded himself to tread carefully. He couldn't help the way his heart beat at the evidence of Potter's returning emotion, but that meant the Potter who hated him was coming back, too. "I don't know what's happening," Potter said. "But I know why I'm doing this. You promised me a better ritual to safeguard the wizarding world."

Draco sighed and spread his hands. "And that's the only thing you care about it, isn't it? Not your own life. Nor your job as an Auror. Not even your friends."

"Don't you say a thing about my friends," Potter said, although his voice warbled uncertainly up and down the scale, not having the conviction that it really should. "I mean it." He shook his head and touched his forehead as though his scar was paining him. "And my job as an Auror *does*

involve caring about the world.”

“You still haven’t listened to me enough,” Draco said. “You won’t understand the importance of the ritual you did or the one I can use to replace it until your heart is back in your chest.”

“It never left, physically,” Potter began.

Draco recognized how literally Potter had taken him, and held up a hasty hand. “Yes, I don’t want to hear the details,” he said. “Knowing how chain rituals work and the way this one affected you is enough.” He turned to look for a path through the jungle, but every one his eyes fell on flickered and vanished. He sighed. Probably only Potter could find his way through this place. “Lead on.”

Potter said nothing. Again Draco turned to face him. Potter was meant to throw *big* obstacles in Draco’s path. Draco didn’t want a constant series of small ones. Those would bore him.

“Do you really have another ritual that can replace this one?” Potter whispered, leaning near enough to stare into Draco’s eyes. “Or are you making that up so you can persuade me to forsake this magic and take my heart back?”

Draco stepped up to him and stared into his eyes back. Gryffindors like Potter thought someone was honest as long as they didn’t flinch or flush or give any of the other obvious signs of a lie. But *because* Potter was a Gryffindor, he was horrible at lying himself, and didn’t know how to think outside that box of honesty.

Draco, on the other hand, was excellent at deception of all kinds.

“I spent five years walking around the world, Potter,” he said, softly, earnestly, neglecting to mention how much of that “walking” had been on the backs of winged horses, or on brooms, or by Floo. “I learned about dark rituals and secrets that I had only the faintest notion of when I left Britain. I went on that journey partially to grow up. Do you think you know *everything*? Really?”

Potter wavered. Then he straightened his back and said, “I don’t know why you’re so invested in the world being protected from Dark Lords, anyway.”

Draco rolled his left sleeve up. Potter stepped back from the Dark Mark. Draco couldn’t keep his eyebrows from rising. *I wonder why. Is he that afraid of it, or is this the result of his partially chained-up emotions?*

“I have plenty invested in the notion of keeping a new Dark Lord from rising,” Draco snapped, and let his sleeve fall back down over the Mark. “I know you don’t understand people who aren’t your friends, or people who aren’t Gryffindors, or maybe the categories overlap and it’s just ‘people like me.’ But I don’t ever want to be a slave again.”

That was true, as far as it went. It just wasn’t true for the particular combination of words he’d given Potter. He’d found the best way to avoid worrying about slavery was to drink a lot, and show off the Mark as a symbol of rebellion to people who had no idea what it was.

Potter nodded, eyes big and luminous, and for a moment, Draco thought he would say something else, something more personal. But either his chained heart or the way he had always regarded Draco prevented that, and he turned away and held his wand out instead. One of the paths stopped moving and became a shimmering line of light leading away into the trees at an angle. “This way.”

Potter plunged ahead. Draco followed thoughtfully, spinning the bird's golden feather in his fingers and thinking about the point where lies became truth.

\*

They had been walking through the jungle long enough to soak Potter's shirt with sweat and require Draco to cast five charms that stopped himself from sweating. Whether they were in a jungle or in the Manor's drawing room, he had standards to maintain.

They finally stopped, or rather Potter stopped, on the bank of a rushing river. He peered ahead, and then nodded. "This is where I left it," he said.

"What?" Draco stepped up beside him. He had to wonder if the river was real, it seemed so cool and the roar and mist that rose from it so intense. Perhaps Potter had partially adapted a real place instead of using illusions for everything.

"The house," Potter said, and gestured ahead.

Draco blamed the effects of the glamours shifting around them for the fact that he hadn't noticed it at once. But yes, there was a house there, a palace of glittering white and grey stone, sprawling along the far bank. Draco eyed the shaded courtyards and decided, with a sigh, that they probably weren't real. Nothing he wanted that badly was.

"The next animal you have to fight lives there," Potter said.

Draco looked at him sharply. His eyes were dull again, and it took a long moment for his pointing hand to fall back to his side. Draco sighed, noiselessly this time. Of course something like this would happen. He had just got Potter settled back into something like this normal self, and the ritual started to take over again.

*At least that gives me some clues as to the nature of the chain ritual.* The kind that created small, temporary changes that then relapsed were fairly rare.

"I suppose I stay here, and you go and fight it." Potter was blinking at a small green frog in the tree next to them as though he didn't know how it could have got off the ground. The frog blinked golden eyes as big as Draco's last tattoo and hopped up the trunk. Potter gave a little grunt of enlightenment.

Draco strode forwards. Even crossing a real river and facing God knew what kind of creature in the stone palace—probably another illusion—was preferable to staying with Potter once he reentered this stupid trance state.

The river lapped and foamed around his ankles, real enough to soak the hems of his trouser legs before he cast an Impervious Charm. Draco snorted and shook his head as he waded forwards. He couldn't even blame Potter for that carelessness; he had been so sure that the river was an illusion, he hadn't bothered to cast the spell.

The river lasted until he was halfway across, and then vanished. Draco paused, blinked a little, and lifted the dripping hems of his trousers—which were dry now, as though the water had been a glamour from the beginning.

This was powerful magic, and a kind Draco didn't feel easy about confronting. But his heart was

racing and his palms were damp with something other than condensation from a glass, which meant he was willing to keep going.

The magic might come from the chain ritual, and not Potter. Which meant it was a kind Draco had never heard of before, but it would still have something in common with the other chain rituals he knew about, simply because that was the way those rites *worked*. He had something to do other than sit around and be bored.

He could almost cheer Potter for doing something so stupid in the first place.

He sprang lightly up on the grass in front of the palace, which had until a moment ago been the river bank. The door that faced him was at the end of a short, blunt wing that projected forwards from the rest of the building like a nose from a face. The walls were all glittering white and grey stone, but the doors were huge, made of heavy wood, clasped with iron, and each had a golden sunburst in the middle.

Draco watched the gold sparkle, and then he took the feather from the bird he had defeated out of his pocket and held it up in front of him, watching the gold shine back and forth in gleams of light from feather to sunburst and from sunburst to feather.

The doors swung open.

Draco walked forwards, keeping his steps gentle, turning his head from side to side as he passed inside the immense walls. The feather hadn't been the weapon he would need to face the creature here, then, the way he'd hoped, because that would involve less danger for him personally. It had been the key instead. Well, Potter had warned him it might be.

That *did* mean Draco didn't have any idea what would come next, or any weapon that might avail him against it—except his magic, and his wits.

*And those have always been enough for any Malfoy.*

Putting his head up and whistling a little so anything that watched him wouldn't think he had been uncomfortable, Draco proceeded down a corridor empty of everything but a few windows high on the walls that looked out on the sun and the jungle. The flagstones shone beneath his feet, not dusty, the huge joists in them echoing perfectly the ones in the ceiling. The corridor looked as though someone had made it by laying weaves of stone together, instead of building it.

Beautiful, Draco thought. He might have considered taking it as a second home if it wasn't an illusion made up by a crazy man who thought himself responsible for all the ills of the wizarding world.

Then a door opened at the far end of the corridor, one Draco hadn't noticed, it fit in so perfectly with the wall. He was glad that there was a door there instead of the dead end it had looked like, though. He stood and politely awaited developments.

A dog stepped out of the door and into the middle of the corridor, where it shook its head back and forth and then sat down and scratched behind one ear for so long Draco wondered if magical creatures got fleas. It wasn't a question he'd ever had reason to be interested in before.

The dog stood back up and faced Draco, head cocked to the side, tail wagging slightly. Draco studied it back. It had a long, squarish body, a ropy tail, huge paws for its size, and a squarish

muzzle, too. When it parted its jaws, the teeth were long enough to make Draco reach for his wand.

This had to be the second guardian. But at the moment, other than baring its teeth, it hadn't done anything intimidating. Draco didn't know what he was supposed to do, what would be appropriate.

They stood there for so long that Draco started feeling silly. "This is stupid," he said aloud, and began to move towards the door behind the dog. It was the only thing he had seen so far that might lead into the rest of the house.

The dog tensed and crouched, a growl rumbling up from its throat. Draco stopped and watched it again, but this time, it didn't relax because he did. The growl went on, and then it began to charge him.

Where it ran, its claws tore gouges from the stone, and sparks leaped into life behind it, starting small fires.

"You're *kidding* me," Draco said blankly, and almost didn't get out of the way in time as the dog breathed fire.

The fire was as bright gold and orange as the flames of a phoenix, and Draco leaped into the air and came down in a way that would have made his dance instructors in Paris applaud, although he thought they never could have envisioned him using the talents they'd taught him *quite* like this. He shook his hair out of his eyes and pressed closer to the wall as the dog wheeled around and faced him.

The dog didn't immediately rush in. It wagged its tail a few times and turned its head back and forth a few more, apparently lining up its angle to Draco and deciding what it wanted to do. Draco shook his head.

"I'm not going to be intimidated by a creature that should be sleeping at some old wizard's feet," he said aloud.

The dog growled loudly enough that Draco almost didn't hear the crackle of the coming flames. He drew his wand and held it ready, but loose at his side. The dog seemed smart. If he cast too soon, then he wouldn't get it close enough to let the magic really take effect.

The dog scraped its claws back and forth on the stone and growled constantly under its breath. Draco decided it was waiting for a sign of weakness. Not that he knew how the minds of magical dogs worked, really, but he had already seen it was different from the golden bird, which simply attacked regardless of where Draco was at the time or whether he seemed ready.

So Draco took a long, confident stride forwards as if he was coming to confront the dog, and "slipped" instead. He slapped a hand over his ankle and uttered a delicate little shriek. "Oh, I've sprained it, I've sprained it!"

The dog couldn't have been stupid enough for fall for that, not really, but it was hesitating, staring at him, baring its teeth, and perhaps it got impatient after all. It rushed him, the flame flaring around it and making it look like a number of nightmares Draco had had as a child.

But Draco was no longer a child, and he hadn't really slipped. He conjured water in front of him, a brimming sheet of it, a *Protego* made of it. It wasn't really that hard to change the way spells manifested, as long as you weren't trying to make some deeper change in their nature.

*Potter's probably powerful enough to do something like that.*

But did Potter use his power for something like that? No, he did not. He enslaved himself with chain rituals and left Draco to pick up the pieces of his stupidity.

The water splashed into the dog's fire and choked it, and the dog let out a surprised, pained yelp. Draco used another spell to string it up from the ceiling in the midst of all that steam, and the dog flew upwards and hung there.

Draco tried a variation of the spell that had stopped the golden bird's heart, this one meant for larger animals. Not that he knew the spell that would stop a human's heart, of course not. He hadn't studied *that* kind of thing.

Nothing happened this time, though, except—

Except that the chain holding the dog to the ceiling snapped the moment the beast struggled against it, and it came crashing to the floor, turning its head to snarl at Draco. It shimmered all over with fire.

Draco blinked. For the first time, he had the feeling that he might be in trouble.

## A White Dungeon

Draco opened his eyes and groaned a little. He sat up and winced when his hand met the throbbing lump on the back of his head. He was in a bad way.

Then he realized that his hand was down at his side and in fact it was a wall pressing against the lump on the back of his head, and grimaced. He really *was* in a bad way if he couldn't even keep track of where the parts of his body were at any given moment.

He shut his eyes and concentrated on memory, which he thought would help him most right now. He remembered the dog rushing him, and he had cast another water shield to obliterate the flames it had tried to breathe at him. He knew *that* much. He fastened that image in his mind, and held it there. What had happened after it? How had he got here?

He didn't know where "here" was, in fact, but it was a dark and enclosed space, and that was enough to tell him its differences from the sunlit corridors he had walked through. He reached out with both hands and felt for the confines of the room.

Tall enough to let him sit up and wide enough to let him lie down, Draco judged. Otherwise, it was remarkably small; his hands brushed against stone almost as soon as he stretched them out beyond that.

He envisioned himself in a little stone egg, one that could be blocked or crushed by the ceiling falling in, the way that he could die down here and no one else would ever know what had happened to him—

Draco drew a deep, slow breath, and told himself he was being ridiculous. Yes, ridiculous. What kind of *Malfoy* panicked because his enemy had put him in a cell? Malfoys had been in all sorts of cells down the centuries, and they had come out and put their enemies inside them instead.

Not that Draco had the urge to do that with the dog. He smiled a little to think of it, though. But no, what he wanted was to kill it, and force it to relinquish whatever little piece of Potter's heart it had in storage.

*Potter's heart. What will happen to him if I die here, and don't free myself, or convince the dog to do it? However it managed to put me in the dungeon in the first place.*

Draco sighed as the answer came to him. He would stay there, of course. He hadn't let anyone know he was going on this mad quest with Potter; he hadn't even bothered to inform his parents that he had figured out the chain ritual. He had simply leapt straight into it, and let Potter take him from the Manor to the bird's cave.

Well, that would change when he got out of here. Draco would write down what he knew so far and insist on finding an owl to send it to his parents, and Pansy. Pansy might have become a troublesome shrew obsessed with the war and her family, but at least she would appreciate the fact that Draco wouldn't want knowledge of this kind—potential and glorious blackmail material—die with him.

Now there was only the problem of getting out of the dungeon. Draco accepted that he didn't know



how he had got here, how he had lost the battle with the dog so badly, only that it had knocked him unconscious and put him here somehow.

His responsibility was to figure out how to escape, not to minutely analyze every possible movement of the dog for clues.

Draco stood up, and nodded when the ceiling almost knocked him on the head. That was how high it was, then. He groped for his wand, without much hope, and nearly fell over in surprise when he found it inside his clothes.

*Did the dog know it was important to wizards?* Perhaps it had associated wands with Potter and felt obscurely that Draco should keep it, even though it was a weapon. Or maybe Draco was crediting the bloody dog with *far* too much intelligence and he should go ahead and act while he could.

When he held the wand up and turned in a slow circle, the *Lumos* illuminated the cell fully. Draco blinked as painful sparks leaped into his eyes. His dungeon cell was made of white marble, the same eye-shatteringly pure color as the walls in the corridors above. It wouldn't be surprising, Draco thought, if it was dug out of the house's foundation somehow.

*Somehow.* He was tired of that word, unless it could be attached to "miraculously," as in, "Somehow, he miraculously escaped."

He toyed with casting a few spells that would burrow up through the stone, but had to put that notion aside. He had no idea how thick the stone was, or what may lie outside the door. Sure, it *seemed* like this was part of the foundations, but he could as easily be inside a tower without windows. Bloody lot of good it would do to start burrowing and then break through a wall to tumble out of the sky.

He also couldn't see a door, which made picking a lock rather out of the question. Draco took a moment to mourn for the lack of opportunity to use the skills Louis had taught him.

He thought about it a little more, and then smiled. What did Malfoys do when wrongfully imprisoned in dungeons by their enemies? They wrote to the newspapers. They lodged cold and furious complaints with the proper authorities. They entertained visitors and dropped cryptic hints about the secrets they knew that might be worth their freedom.

In other words, captive Malfoys *made a fuss*.

Draco didn't want to break through the walls blindly in case it brought them down on his head, but there was something he could do that might convince the dog he was trying to. He raised his wand and whispered, "*Adstrepo*."

Deep, booming noises began to resound against the cell's walls, including hollow sounds that mimicked clapping hands. There were mad cackles, too, and the crackling of flames, and sledgehammers hitting stones, and dogs barking. Draco thought that last round might bring the dog faster than anything else.

He cast a charm on his ears to muffle the noise and leaned back to wait.

It didn't take long. Draco heard barking from what sounded like an agitated throat. He cast his spell again, and the clamor of the veritable kennel that seemed like it was trapped in the cell with him redoubled again.

This time, it sounded like paws were scraping against the wall. Draco narrowed his eyes, and made out a thin line of light come into being on the stone. Who knew how the dog operated the door, since it had only paws and not hands, but that mattered less than the essential truth that there was a way into the open appearing. Draco stepped back and banished the *Lumos* from his wand so the dog wouldn't see him right away.

Finally, the door opened completely, and the dog thrust its head into the cell, staring around. Draco saw the moment when its eyes widened and it began to suck its breath in, probably to clear the cell out with a good burst of flames.

Draco sprang lightly out and landed in front of the dog with a tumbler's movement that would have made Danielle, his last dancer lover, weep in pride.

The dog scrambled to the side, and its breath came out as harmless smoke and fumes and no more. Draco gestured lazily with his wand, and the smoke flew back up the dog's nostrils and buried itself in its throat.

The dog began to sneeze frantically. Draco stepped towards it. He wasn't taking any chances this time with a spell that was supposed to stop an animal's heart. This dog could resist most magic, or at least some.

That was all right. Draco would kill it *indirectly*.

"*Accio* rock," he said cheerfully, focusing his wand on a loose block of stone in the corridor ceiling that looked lower than the rest. He heard the dog's frenzied growl, and stepped out of the way of its charge.

Which put the dog neatly in the path of the falling stone.

There was a loud and messy half-explosion. Draco saw blood stain the far side of the stone, and wrinkled his nose. There was also a smell that resembled the mixture between a Muggle chemical factory and, well, wet dog.

Then the blood faded, and, with it, the paws sticking out from under the block. Draco levitated it up, in time to see the last traces of the body become two simpler objects. One was a piece of brown fur that Potter had probably enchanted to become the dog in the first place. The other was a glinting white tooth that Draco bent down and picked up a second before the palace followed the dog.

Draco picked up the tooth, tried to spin it, and cursed mildly as it tumbled out of his hand and landed on the ground. Well, he ought to have remembered that a tooth wouldn't spin as easily as a feather. What really mattered was that he had *won*.

He picked up the tooth and turned around, wondering whether the river had come back despite the palace's vanishing. No, there was only a spread of green plants, shining as though they had never been trampled or crossed, and Potter standing some meters away from him, on what would have been the opposite bank, gaping at him.

Draco couldn't help himself. Faced with surprise so profound, there was only one reaction that made any sense. He bowed and swept his hands out to either side. "What do you think?" he asked, and then stood back up and bowed again, bending fully at the waist this time and keeping his eyes

on the jungle floor. “That one, or this one?”

“I don’t care, *Malfoy*.”

Draco looked up, and laughed at the way Potter’s eyes blazed and his teeth were locked together. “You resent me for taking care of the threat to your heart and power,” he said comfortably, shrugging a little and bouncing the tooth in his hand. “Well, resent me all you want. The bird is gone, and now the dog. You’re a little closer to being free, and the chain ritual is a little closer to being ended.”

Potter drew his wand.

Well, *that* hadn’t been something Draco had thought would happen. He took a step back and lifted his wand in front of him. “You’re remembering that I’m on your side, right, Potter?” he asked cautiously. “That war business some years ago was all a misunderstanding, really.”

“I know you’re on the side of having a Dark Lord come back to haunt the world,” Potter said. “I never should have trusted that nonsense you spouted to me about another ritual that could hold them back. I *chose* to make this sacrifice. What right do you have to disrupt it?”

Draco took another few steps closer, instead of backing away the way he’d planned on. Astonishment would do that to people sometimes. “You can ask that, Potter?” he demanded. “Really?”

Whatever Potter thought of the tone of his voice, it at least had the effect of surprising him. He backed up a step himself, and stared. Then he said, “Yes. I can ask it for all the reasons that I’ve already mentioned—because you’re my enemy, and you have a reason to—”

“You just mentioned them, so you don’t need to repeat them,” Draco interrupted him, and sighed. “Really, Potter. How did I find out about the chain ritual in the first place?”

“You noticed something wrong with me. And that’s strange.” Potter folded his arms. “You never cared *before* whether I was behaving like a good little hero or acting up, unless you could get me in trouble.”

“But how did I learn it was a chain ritual?” Draco reminded him patiently. “Instead of, say, that you’d decided to sacrifice your brain for greater magic skill in the sure and certain belief that losing it would make no difference?”

Potter stared at him, his mouth working, obviously torn between whether he should pursue the insult or answer Draco’s question. Draco stood there and waited. He was thoroughly sick of this. Potter had been the one to surrender the key to the problem to him, and he still wanted to blame Draco for it. *Typical*.

Draco wondered idly what would happen if Potter was placed in a situation where he couldn’t blame *anyone*, except himself. He would probably explode, or something.

“You know because I told you,” Potter said at last.

Draco nodded carefully, in the exaggerated fashion that it seemed Potter was most likely to understand. “And what would prevent someone else—someone who really *does* want the Dark Lords to come back, which I assure you I don’t, since I don’t fancy being a slave again—from

asking you? You were so out of it that you would have given the answer to anyone. When that ritual took your heart, it took any sense that you cared about yourself, too. It destroyed your self-preservation instinct,” he added kindly, because Potter was gaping at him and so must require a simpler explanation. “You never would have believed me so easily before, but suspicion and hatred are *emotions*. So you told me. You could have told any other enemy, too.”

*Or a friend.* Maybe it would have been better if Potter had confessed to one of his friends and they had set out to destroy the ritual instead of Draco. At least Potter wouldn’t be having a shouting match with *Draco* in the middle of a fading jungle.

On the other hand, Draco would still be bored, and that really didn’t bear thinking of.

“I never would have confessed that easily,” Potter said, although his forehead was wrinkled and he frowned into the distance as though he almost remembered the conversation. “You tricked me somehow.”

Draco rolled his eyes, hard, and then winced and resolved not to do that again. It hurt, and he didn’t owe it to Potter to hurt himself for Potter’s sake. He had done more than enough for him out of the goodness of his heart. “You told me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Do you want me to use one of those charms that pulls a memory to the surface of your mind and lets it play out before your eyes like a Pensieve?” Draco offered earnestly. “Because I could, you know.”

Potter shuddered. Draco smiled. Those charms hurt for the same reason that breaking an *Obliviate* did: they took a wizard deeper into his mind than he was ever meant to go. “No,” Potter whispered, a little hoarsely, and then coughed and cleared his throat. “No, I don’t want you to do that,” he repeated, more firmly.

“Then accept the truth of what I said,” Draco said, and spread his arms again, although this time he had no temptation to bow. “Accept the *bloody* truth,” he added more harshly, when he saw Potter hesitating. “Yes, this is what happened. How else would I know about that ritual otherwise? You said it was old and secret, and I have to admit, I’ve never heard of anything this elaborate. And I’ve never heard of anything that took someone’s heart to protect the world from Dark Lords, either.”

Potter opened and closed his mouth a few times. Then he said, “Swear to me that you won’t tell anyone else.”

Draco rolled his eyes again, but this time gently, out of consideration for himself, if Potter couldn’t be bothered to have any. “Tell them about the ritual and the content? I couldn’t even if I wanted to. I don’t know the incantation you used or the exact enchantments. By the time it’s broken, it’ll be nothing more than a fond memory, a good story.”

Potter stepped towards him. “I don’t want you to ever mention it again. Either as a good story or a memory.”

Draco peered at him. “But then what will I say to explain where I was in these next few days if people ask me? I *must* have something to say. Preserving a dignified silence is all very well in its way, but I only do what I’m good at.”

“Deny it, Malfoy.” Potter moved another step closer. “Come up with a lie. I don’t care. But you’re going to *stop* here. I forbid you to try and destroy the other guardians.”

Draco widened his eyes. His blood rushed through his veins, and he had to repress the temptation to pant. “Really?” he murmured, full-throated. “You *forbid* me?”

“Yes,” Potter snapped. “You said that you’re doing this because I would have confessed the secret of the ritual to anyone. Well, I won’t, not now that you’ve woken me up a little and warned me about the danger. This is far enough to go. I have enough of my emotions back.”

Draco watched him for a few seconds, then smiled. “I’m still on the word ‘forbid,’” he remarked politely. “How exactly do you think that you can *forbid* me?”

“I swear to God, Malfoy—”

“Because,” Draco said, holding up the dog’s tooth, “I know some spells that can follow this and Apparate me to the place where I would use it, either as a weapon or a key.”

Potter relaxed, staring at him. Then he laughed. “You don’t really, Malfoy,” he said. “You don’t have the slightest idea.”

“Watch me,” Draco said, and cast one of the spells, and let the tooth pull him through oblivion towards the next guardian.

He had to concede that Potter really *was* handsome with an incredulously flushed face.

## The Silver Horse

Draco came out in the middle of a landscape that he thought was as unlike the jungle he'd been in as possible. Heat blasted him. He caught his breath and shook his head. If it was *hot*, then it wasn't *so* unlike the jungle.

But he was in the middle of a barren golden plain that stretched to the horizon in whichever direction he looked, and no matter how he squinted to make something else out, even the distant shimmer of a mirage, he could see nothing.

Draco looked up and down at the sole landmark in front of him, a great black boulder, and wondered if it contained the creature responsible for guarding the next piece of Potter's heart. But he saw nothing, no outline of a door or a building. The boulder provided a bit of shade from the hot sun, but it appeared to do nothing else.

He had to hurry. Potter would be after him in a few minutes at the most. He was half-surprised that he wasn't already here. But this place was probably far away from the dog's jungle, Draco thought, and while his spell had brought him here directly, Potter would need a few Apparition hops.

Because there was no reason not to, and it might reveal something to him, Draco whistled shrilly. "Hello, is anyone there?" he added in as loud a voice as he could when nothing responded to the whistle, making echoes bounce off the boulder.

No one responded in a human voice, but hoofbeats sounded from behind the boulder. Draco turned his shoulder towards it and drew his wand. Too much to hope that this was a curious antelope attracted by his voice or something.

Sure enough, the creature, when it came into view, looked as unnatural as the metallic golden bird, or the blocky brown dog. It was a horse made of silver, its hooves sparkling and glowing like the plate that Draco's parents kept for special guests. Its mane flowed and lapped down its neck like water. Its head had fine, intelligent eyes like tarnished silver that it fixed on him.

Draco had to smile in spite of himself. Either Potter had good taste in horseflesh, or his magic did. This was a silver Arabian.

And the minute it saw Draco, it stopped and stared at him. It must have expected Potter, Draco thought. Who else would have a reason to visit this place? Or maybe his voice sounded a little like Potter's—to the ears of a magical creature, although surely to no one else.

Draco nodded to the horse. "Hello," he said, and because they couldn't simply stand there and stare at each other until Potter arrived, he took the dog's tooth from his pocket and held it up to see the horse's response.

The horse shivered all over, and its muscles rolled like oil beneath its gleaming coat. Then it wheeled and kicked its hooves up sharply. Draco dodged out of the way so it couldn't hit him.

It didn't mean to, though. The next second, while Draco was still recovering from the sand it had tossed in his eyes, the horse had taken off across the desert, fleeing from him, running so fast that

Draco didn't know if he could catch up even with a broom. Draco stared after it, and then down at the tooth, which seemed to have changed shape and weight in his hands.

Yes, it had. Now it was a dull ivory-colored bridle, with striations down the reins that resembled the grooves Draco would expect to see on a tooth. Draco examined it, and then began to smile.

So, he didn't have to wrestle with the horse or kill it, did he? Just catch up with it, bridle it, and ride it. It was no wonder the horse had fled. No need to make the challenge too easy, and there were few wizards who would be able to keep up with its speed.

But Draco wasn't one of the many.

Then there was a blast of thunder behind him, and Draco knew he had stood there too long congratulating himself on his cleverness. He reached down and tapped his wand against his boots without looking behind him, because he had seen anger on Potter's face plenty of times. He whispered the Hermes Charm.

Small wings immediately grew from his ankles, and hurled him into the air. It was difficult to control your speed like this, one reason it wasn't often used, but Draco stood upright and laughed as he flew after the horse. A desert, wide and hot or not, wasn't much of a challenge when you had done air-skimming over the Pyrenees.

*"Malfoy!"*

"It does me good to hear you so outraged, Potter!" Draco yelled over his shoulder, while the wings on his ankles beat steadily on and lifted and lowered him in a zigzag pattern. It was just something the Charm naturally did, but at the moment, Draco was glad, because it made him more likely to duck any curses Potter sent after him. He leaned to the left, to the right, and spun upside-down a little, because he could.

He heard a scuffling of dust behind him, and did risk a glance this time, although it meant he had left off looking for the horse ahead of him.

Yes, Potter had used the Hermes Charm, too. But he obviously didn't have as much experience with it as Draco did, because he was fighting with the wings and trying to pursue a straight line after Draco, which wouldn't be possible.

Satisfied he had gained another few minutes, Draco turned around and searched for a racing shape in the midst of dust. A few minutes might be all he needed, he thought, winding the tooth-colored bridle around his fingers.

At last, he saw a distant flash ahead, bright enough to nearly blind him, where the sunlight gleamed off the silver flanks of the horse. Draco saluted the sun with the bridle and crouched down, aiming to curve around to the right and get as close as he could before the animal saw him.

Either it already had, though, or its speed was incredible even compared to the Hermes Charm. It was still running, head bobbing, its tail streaming behind it like the tail of a comet, and as Draco watched, it began to pull away from him.

"No," Draco said aloud. "That isn't going to happen."

He looked around for any other sort of landmark, any barrier against which he could corner the

horse, and had to admit that it wasn't likely. Nothing but open land all ahead of him, and whether Potter had found this place or created it with illusions, that meant the horse had *plenty* of room to run.

So Draco braced himself and bent down so that he was holding onto the sides of his boots. Around one hand he wrapped the bridle, as tight as it would go, until it felt as if it would draw blood from his wrist; in the other he clutched his wand.

"Go," he said aloud, and hurled himself into the tight spin that a friend had discovered, along with the unique effects it had on someone flying with the Hermes Charm.

Draco spun in place like a corkscrew for a second, and then soared straight up, upside-down, around and around, sky and earth one great kaleidoscope of bright colors. A broom had nothing on it. Draco cursed breathlessly, and then clamped his mouth shut as his stomach nearly rebelled and shot away without him.

But he came out of the spin in the place he needed to be, above and in front of the horse. For whatever reason, that particular trick made the Hermes Charm go faster than anything else—certainly than most inexperienced wizards still floundering with the magic, and yelling somewhere beneath and behind him.

And faster, it turned out, than a magical silver horse.

It hadn't seen him, Draco judged. It was still tearing towards him, and in a straight line. Draco studied it, then nodded. He had thought there had to be *some* price the horse paid for its immense speed, and this was it. It couldn't jig from side to side the way Draco could, the way a normal running horse could. It would just have to go full speed ahead and trust that nothing got in its way.

Or falling on it.

Draco measured the distance between them and then bent down and held his hands out in front of him. That made the Hermes Charm react with a dizzying drop. Draco laughed soundlessly, because doing it aloud might result in warning the horse.

He fell, and fell, and fell. The wind was forcing his eyes almost shut, tearing tears from it that made Draco want to claw at his face. Still he didn't move, still he didn't try to break free of the roll, except at the right moment, which he felt the same way a Seeker felt the Snitch drawing closer, and—

He reached out his hands, and a thick mane, heavy as bolts of cloth of silver, tangled around them. Draco winced a little as his arse came down in the middle of the horse's spine, but then it was done and he was riding the horse, his legs locking around the barrel, the bridle he needed flapping right next to the head of the beast it was meant to tame.

The horse went mad.

Draco had known it would, but he had underestimated what it would be like, probably because the horse was a magical creature and he had learned to ride mortal ones, or at least winged ones. This horse bowed its head and tried to simply roll him over its neck onto the ground. Because of his grip on the mane, Draco wasn't dislodged, and he clapped his legs to the silver flanks and laughed breathlessly.



The horse then leaped straight up into the air, coming down on all four legs and rearing before the hooves had touched for more than a second, screaming as it danced on its hind feet, kicking out on the left and then the right, so that most of the time it was poised on only one leg. Draco swore and clung. One of *his* legs had swung free, and he hastily brought it back to where it should be—

Just as the horse's head came around and the giant teeth nearly clamped in his thigh.

Draco cast sparks from his wand to singe the horse's mane, and the beast pulled back in that direction and screamed again. At least it had dropped back to all fours, probably because not even a magical creature could pull off the feats of balance it would take to keep from falling. Now, though, it began to bounce, steady and swift, and so jarring that Draco nearly bit through his tongue the first time they came down.

But at least he had learned something from the experience that made him grin grimly now as he reached for the bridle. The horse was doing all this as the best distraction it could, because the threat Draco represented was real. He only had to get the bridle on, and the horse's freedom would end.

Perhaps even its existence. The dog had faded when crushed by a boulder, the bird when its heart stopped; Draco would bet that the horse wouldn't keep going past the imposition of a will stronger than its own.

He had ridden through his thoughts and the horse's continued bouncing without a pause, and now he knotted the bridle in his hands and leaned forwards, straps spread wide. The bridle had a bit, but only a crude one, made of iron and gawky. Draco would have hesitated at the size and roughness of it, but the horse wasn't real and wouldn't last long once the thing was in its mouth.

The horse seemed to catch sight of the bridle from the corner of its eye, and this time it went forwards in a roll, neck aiming for the earth, forelegs folding beneath it as neat as you please.

Draco turned sideways and hopped into the air, sustained by the wings still on his ankles, and the horse did nothing but jar its own spine as it hit the sand full-on. It whinnied in what sounded like pain and stood up, shaking its head so the mane bounced and sparkled. For a second, those huge shining eyes were staring at nothing.

Draco dashed at it through the air and tossed the bridle at its head as he passed.

The straps were around the neck, the reins almost settling into place, the bit snaking towards its mouth—

And then the horse found its spirit to struggle again. It whirled in circle after circle, hooves waving up and down like the arms of frantically signaling Quidditch coaches. Draco floated on air, able to lift or lower himself instinctively to dodge the kicks, and let it drag him. It would tire out sooner than he would.

For a moment, its head bowed and it stood still, and Draco thought he might have won. But his instincts, playing full force now, kept him from moving in, and it turned out that was more than a good thing.

The horse came back up and turned its head, wicked teeth snapping. They missed Draco's hands as he reeled out of the way again, but they closed on the strap of the bridle, and the horse began to wrench, neck cocked at an accordion-like angle.

Draco snarled the spell he ought to have used before, but he'd been too caught up in the excitement of chasing the horse and the dream of bridling it and slowing it down. The Stunner caught the horse full in the chest, and for a moment it stood there as though it was too big to fall, or as though it would resist the magic.

Maybe it would have. Draco never found out. That minute was what he needed to quickly loop the reins into place along the horse's neck, pry its mouth open, and slide the bit back on the tongue until it wouldn't fit anymore.

The horse's eyes dimmed the moment the bridle settled fully into place. Draco had to admit, as he watched the shine in the glorious coat turn fully tarnished, that he would have preferred a solution that left the horse alive and around to carry him.

But it was a magical creature in the end, part of the chain ritual, not an independently existing animal. It wavered, and further tarnished, and finally collapsed into a little pile of ashes and metal shavings. Draco knelt down, brushing the strands of the bridle aside, and found two objects in the middle of the pile. One was the silver spoon the horse had presumably been made from.

The other was a single short silver hair that Draco thought might have come from the forelock. He nodded and tucked it into a safe pouch on his belt.

"*Malfoy.*"

Draco turned around, and blinked. He had thought something must have gone wrong when Potter didn't follow him.

Something, it seemed, had. But for him, and not Potter.

Potter hovered on the air, panting, and stared at him. He was magnificent, more than magnificent, Draco had to admit, with wings beating at the wrists as well as on his ankles—a variation of the spell that most people who used it for a few months discovered, but not those who had just been introduced to it. And if it had taken him this long to catch up to Draco, well, the way he wavered with the wingbeats, instinctively leaning his body in one direction or another, said that he would be more of a challenge now.

Suddenly Draco wasn't as sorrowful for the death of the horse, or its fading, or whatever it should be termed. He met Potter's eyes head on, and smiled, holding out the pouch in which he'd put the horse's hair.

"You've had your fun," Potter said, with a deep flash in his eyes that made Draco's mouth flood with saliva, because of how deep it *went* and what it signified. "I know that you think you have to ruin everything I set my hand to just because it's me and that's what you do, but you *don't*. Give me back the hair and we'll count it as even. And I've set up anti-Apparition spells around this place," he added, before Draco could even speak, "so you ought to know you can't pull that trick you pulled with the tooth."

The "trick" Draco had pulled with the tooth hadn't been traditional Apparition, but he saw no reason to disabuse Potter of the notion. He held out the pouch again, and nodded. "You really want this back?" he asked in a tone of distant wonder.

"I do," Potter said.

“Then *come and get it*,” Draco said, and doubled down the way he had when he wanted to catch the horse, and fled for the sky.

## The Red Flight

Draco's world for long moments was pure flight, pure aim. He rose, and he rose, and he rose, and he rose, and his vision filled with blooming black and red roses, and his chest heaved like a bellows, like that bellows pumping iron and smoke that he'd helped to shut down in Austria, and he knew it was time to go back down.

He assumed Potter had followed him. He might not know all the tricks for making the Hermes Charm go faster than Draco and his friends had discovered, but he had conjured wings on his wrists as well as his ankles, and that would make up for a lot.

So he dived again, without bothering to pause or look behind him. He heard a startled roar, but it might have been the wind in his ears as easily as a shout. He was spinning and falling, diving, the ground beneath him coming up again in a flash of gold. He knew that he would have to stop in a minute, half a minute, less than fifteen seconds, because otherwise he would smash into it at top speed and Potter would *win*. Which was simply unacceptable.

He pulled up before he touched it, and turned to the side, so far that he was practically lying down in the air. He felt something grab his ankle, but the wings had already reacted to the change in position and begun to spin him so fast that Draco knew he would probably lose his breakfast soon. He usually had, when he did challenges like this with his friends.

The point, though, the *point* was that the fierce spin tore Potter's fingers from their hold on his foot, and Draco bobbed back up like an apple in water, shaking his head and gasping as he touched the pouch that held the silver hair. Yes, it was still with him.

"Malfoy!"

The shout shook the air around him. Draco looked down—well, to the side, anyway, he had to admit his sense of basic directions was skewed right now, with the way he was hanging in the air—and saw Potter struggling furiously against the wings on his wrists and ankles, rowing in circles. Draco blinked, wondering what had happened.

Then he knew. It seemed Potter had tried to follow him, and had ended up with the wings beating in different directions, trying to fly him north and south and east and west at once. So he was scooting around like a beetle on its back, and getting more and more frustrated, especially when he kicked out and didn't start moving because he didn't have anything to push off from.

Draco began to laugh, and it hurt his stomach and made *him* spin in lazy circles, too, and Potter was probably going to kill him when he caught up with Draco, and he should stop, but he *couldn't*, Potter was still rowing and he was too *funny*.

"You'd better enjoy what life you have left, Malfoy," Potter said calmly. He had already started to discover a way out of his predicament, Draco saw, putting his ankles side-by-side and forcing the wings to beat together, the pinions stroking and fluttering against each other and learning how to fly from one another. "When I catch up with you, it won't last long."

"I never reckoned that I would live to an old age, anyway," Draco said delicately. "What with the Dark Lord, and the mountain-skimming, and all the rest of it..." He stretched out his own legs, not

touching them the way Potter did, but holding them parallel to each other. Time to see if he could pull off a trick he'd never been able to use. On the other hand, he hadn't had this impetus to perfect it, either.

"Mountain-skimming?" Potter squinted at him. "Why would someone as stupid and incompetent as you are, as *cowardly* as you are, decide to do something like that?"

Draco widened his eyes at Potter, while his stomach danced and jumped for another reason, a new one. Potter had showed him anger before, but Draco had forgotten how addictive his curiosity could be. Of course, the main time he had provoked it before had been during their sixth year, when he had been too busy to enjoy it.

"Why, Potter," Draco said, and clasped his hand to his chest. "Why would someone as upright and uptight as you are know about a sport that the Ministry's banned?"

It would have been easy for Potter to say that he knew about it because he had arrested people who practiced it, and Draco actually waited for that comeback. But instead, Potter's face turned the color of a Gryffindor curtain, and his eyes darted away from Draco's, for just a second.

Draco laughed again. "You've *done* it, haven't you?" he asked. "And you shut those parts of yourself away with that chain ritual, too." He shook his head. "I'm amazed at you, Harry. Amazed that you could stand for anyone to think that you're just a dutiful little Ministry drone. And amazed that anyone bought the act the chain ritual put you through for so long."

Really, how blind *were* Potter's friends, that he'd been able to get away without questions for a fortnight?

"Don't call me Harry," Potter said through gritted teeth. He had almost got himself back in order now, with his hands clasped the way his feet had been. In another moment, he would rock to the side, and then he would be in the right position to fly after Draco.

"It seems that not enough people do," Draco said, and stretched his arms out, too. Hands not touching, not coming close enough for the wings to brush; that was the first and the most common way that someone messed up the trick that Draco was currently trying. He ducked his head and heaved out a breath, gathering the air in his lungs that the flight would take away. "Or they would have rescued you before this."

"*Stop talking about my friends.*"

"Right," Draco said. Potter was indeed upright now, and all the wings were beating in the correct pattern, and his eyes and wand were focused on Draco. "You still want that silly horse-hair back, I take it?"

"If you don't give it back to me *right now*, Malfoy—"

"You'll eat my dust," Draco said, and kicked like a swimmer, and this time it was perfect, of course it was, with the threat of murder in Potter's eyes to tighten his muscles. This time, he lived up to his heroes who had done this, the mountain-skimmers Oliphant and Green, who had defied the Paris Ministry for years to fly among the twisting valleys and sudden peaks of the Pyrenees.

This time, he shot away sideways like a comet, and went faster than anything mortal could have dreamed, faster than the silver horse, faster than a normal person could fly with the Hermes

Charm.

Potter's shout of frustration rose behind him, but trailed away immediately, and Draco laughed giddily. He tried once to look over his shoulder, but the motion pushed his legs dangerously close to each other, and if the wings touched, then there was a strong chance he would fall out of the sky.

On the other hand, he didn't want Potter to get too far behind him, did he? Any minute now, Potter might lose the emotion he had achieved so far and fall back into that limp uselessness as the reaction from the horse's death faded, and then he might stand there for an hour, or Apparate back to the Ministry, or—do anything other than follow Draco and keep pushing for the horse-hair, the way Draco wanted.

And Draco had to admit that he didn't know where to go next, didn't know what kind of creature he would be facing. That would be convenient to know, although he could use the spell that he had on the dog's tooth to make the horse-hair take him to its intended destination.

He also wanted to get some time alone to write the letter he had promised himself, the one that would alert someone else of what he was facing. Potter couldn't reconstitute the lost components of the chain ritual, not without obliterating the ones that were left and starting all over, but he might fall into apathy again if he managed to kill Draco.

And then who would free him, and avenge Draco's death? Draco wouldn't want Potter killed or imprisoned in a situation like that; he would want the chain ritual destroyed so that he would be free again, and have to blame Draco for that.

Maybe he would acknowledge his own stupidity, too, although Draco had to admit that was rather a lot to hope for.

Either way, Draco had to slow down.

He rolled back upright, and promptly dropped to the sand. He winced at the jarring motion, and the pain in his knees. Well, he would do what was necessary, and then he could ensure that he retained Potter's attention.

He glanced over his shoulder—

And Potter slammed into him, far closer than Draco had thought he would be, flinging his arms around Draco's neck and choking him so violently that Draco dropped to his knees, gasping for air. His arms flailed, once, and settled. He could feel the magic thrumming in Potter's hands, strengthening them.

"You *bastard*," Potter was saying somewhere, over the roaring in his ears. "As though you couldn't—as though there weren't other things—as though you *had* to do this, you just *had* to, and you don't even care what anyone else feels—"

Draco couldn't be sure that was all of it. The roaring of his heart and blood made him feel like he was missing a lot. But he was sure enough to lift his hands and pry at Potter's arms for a second, until Potter's magic snapped at him and he knew that he would accomplish nothing that way.

He tilted his head back enough to see into Potter's eyes. They didn't resemble the flat, dull ones Draco had looked into earlier that day at all. They were so fiercely alive that Draco might almost have been content to die if he hadn't known that his death would deprive the world of so much

talent and beauty.

So, Potter had his emotions again. That meant he had all the strength of his magic again, his passion driving him.

And it meant he had all the vulnerabilities that the emotions implied, too.

Draco dropped his eyes, and let his head droop at the same time. He whimpered a little, softly, fearfully.

The hands choking him paused.

Draco kept his head bowed, and bit the inside of his cheek, hard, so Potter wouldn't notice the smile that had almost escaped. Draco swallowed, and winced as the swallow exacerbated the bruises that Potter had left. But right now, he thought he could wince all he wanted and still not reach the limit of its usefulness.

"I don't want to kill you, Malfoy." Potter's voice was shaking a little, and he held a wand to Draco's throat, pressing inwards, denting the skin, as though that was more likely to convince Draco when a chokehold wouldn't. Draco knew how to fight wands. "I just want you to give me the silver hair back, and that'll be the end of it. No one *asked* you to interfere, you know."

He sounded sulky from the bottom of his soul, and Draco had to bow his head further, almost draping himself over Potter's arms. If he smiled up into his face, exultant over how *deep* those emotions went, Potter really would get suspicious, and Draco might as well give up on winning the contest right there.

"All right," Draco whispered. "That's right. I'll just give it back, then." He reached for the pouch on his belt, but winced when his arm got tugged up short by the odd position Potter was holding him in. "Can you let me go so I can reach it, please?"

Potter stared at him the way he might have looked at Draco at Hogwarts, his hands tightening until Draco coughed meaningfully. Then Potter snorted and drew his arms away, standing back with his eyes on the pouch at Draco's belt.

Which was what Draco had been waiting for, of course.

They had come quite a distance in their flight, which meant the anti-Apparition wards Potter had raised no longer stretched across the desert immediately around them. Draco had noted that, but he hadn't thought he would be able to take advantage of the fact. Now, he knew he could.

But he wanted to prove a point to Potter first.

"You know why I'm doing this?" he asked softly, as he took the silver strand of hair from his pouch. "Not because I hate you, not because I can't see something you did without wanting to destroy it, although I'm sure those are the reasons that you've convinced yourself of."

Potter shook his head as though trying to banish an irritating fly from his ear. "Why should I care about your reasons, Malfoy? You wouldn't tell me the real ones if you *did* just want to irritate me."

"Right," Draco responded instantly. "That's why you should take what I'm telling you now as true."

Potter stared at him. Draco clucked his tongue sympathetically. “Logical part of your brain coming back more slowly than your emotions?” he asked. “Yes, I’ve had some nights like that myself.”

“The *point*, Malfoy,” Potter said, and held his hand out as though he assumed Draco would meekly drop the strand into it.

*Yes, the chain ritual dulled his logical faculties, too*, Draco noted sagely, and extended his hand. The silver strand of hair dangled and gleamed among his fingers. Potter supposedly had eyes only for it, but he still twitched when Draco smiled.

“I want to see you alive again,” Draco said. “There are just some things that should be true about the world. For example, the Dark Lord should always stay dead. I should always be free to travel around and do exactly as I like—not that my parents agree with that, but I’ll soon convince them of the folly of their position.” His hand was on his wand. Not that Potter noticed. He was still refusing to focus on any other part of Draco’s body than the hand with the silver strand of hair that extended infinitesimally towards him. “And you should always be passionate and free.”

“Did your parents convince you to come home?” Potter sneered at him. “They ought to send you back again.”

“But it’s good for you that I came home,” Draco pointed out earnestly. “No one else could have saved you.”

“I don’t need *saving*.”

“You did,” Draco said. “You would have told anyone who asked about that ritual, because the ritual itself dulled all your concern and your curiosity about other people’s motives. Concern and curiosity are *emotions*, remember. You’re just lucky that someone who had your best interests at heart asked first, and someone with some knowledge about chain rituals.”

Potter’s fists were clenched tightly enough that it looked like he was going to lose a finger. “Even if what you’re saying is true, then I would have told my friends about it when they asked, and Hermione would have researched chain rituals, and they would have ‘saved’ me. But you’re wrong that I needed it. They would have respected my choice, and left me alone if I wanted to sacrifice my heart.”

“I *knew* there was a reason I didn’t like them!” Draco said, and snapped his fingers together, nearly dropping the horsehair.

Potter’s eyes rose to his face, furious, and that meant he was no longer looking at Draco’s hands.

Draco spun and Apparated.

He heard Potter’s roar of fury behind him, but it quickly faded, and Draco landed on the grass outside the Manor. He promptly ran through the gates and up the long gravel doorway towards the front doors, privately cursing his ancestors who had thought it a *grand* idea, to have the doors be so far away from the Apparition point.

He heard the “pop” behind him right away, of course. Potter would have figured out where he was going and immediately Apparated in.



But Draco cast a Shield Charm over his shoulder, and then he was at the front doors, and he ducked through them and slammed them shut, and tossed his cloak and the horsehair at the surprised house-elf, who squeaked and blinked, but caught them.

“Hide those somewhere safe,” he snapped, and took off up the stairs to his room, where he could write the owl he wanted to.

Potter might break through the wards eventually, but they would give him a challenge. And in the meantime, Draco could plan.

And he would, in the end, be victorious. And when he left, Potter would know it, and follow him.

Draco knew that some people, like his mother, might consider his grin as he slammed his bedroom door mental, but he had made the decision to do this. At the very *least*, he wasn't bored anymore.

And at the most, he might earn Potter's gratitude and the gratitude of his friends. Or, wait, unwilling thankfulness, muttered apologies between their teeth, would be even better.

*My greatest reward, though, is going to be seeing the fire returning to Potter's eyes. That's the other thing that should always be true.*

## Blackened Wards

“I suppose you will tell me why Harry Potter is currently outside our wards and attempting to destroy them?”

His mother’s voice had a cool silver chime to it, Draco thought, leaning back from the table where he had written his hasty owl to Pansy and watching the bird wing away through his bedroom window. Just like the air around him had a gold-green radiance to it, gold from his excitement and green from Potter’s eyes.

“It depends,” Draco said, and tilted his head back to smile at her. “What do you think of explanations that depend on rescuing Harry Potter from himself?”

His mother simply closed her eyes and shook her head, slowly, tragically, back and forth. Draco laughed and kissed her hand. Narcissa leaned around him and cast a spell on the window.

The view through it shimmered and changed. Draco’s bedroom no longer looked out on the back gardens—or at least it would appear that way to anyone unfamiliar with the spell Narcissa had used—but down on the gates. Potter was flinging spell after spell against the wards. He didn’t appear to know what weariness was.

Draco drew in a little breath, watching. He had started this to stave off his own boredom and bring some fire back into the world, but seeing the way Potter spun away from the gates and walked to a short distance off, then turned around with his face cramped with his scowl, in the moment before he started throwing curses again, informed Draco there might be other reasons, as well.

“What *did* you do to Mr. Potter?”

His mother’s voice weighed heavily on his mind, and distracted Draco when he would have rather studied the span of Potter’s shoulders. He turned and frowned at her. “You’re always accusing me of doing something,” he complained. “Why?”

“I assume that one of the Ministry’s most valued Aurors, and one who, moreover, did not seem to think we were guilty of anything after the war, has no other reason to be here,” Narcissa said, and tilted her head to the side, slowly enough that she might have been wearing heavy chains on her neck. “Draco.”

“Nothing horrible,” Draco said.

“*Draco.*”

Draco rolled his eyes. That tone was just an octave away from the voice his mother used to use to tell him to do his homework. “Potter had done something stupid, as usual,” he said. He could have told Narcissa all about it—he had done that in his letter to Pansy, after all—but he wanted to clutch this secret to himself a bit longer. His parents might order him to stop, if they knew, and then Draco would have to go to boring lengths to conceal the extent of his involvement from them. “I set out to correct it. He went along with me at first, then took exception when it turned out his stupidity was connected to saving the world. Or so he believes.”

His mother remained still, and Draco knew without turning to her that she was raising her eyebrows. As far as he was concerned, she could go on doing that all she wanted. He wasn't going to mention any more.

At last, Narcissa sighed delicately and touched his shoulder with one hand. "At least reassure me that Potter is not likely to bring down the wards."

"You must know the strength of them better," Draco said, tilting his head back and smiling at her, "considering you've lived in this house longer."

For a moment, her hand tightened. Then she moved back from him and said to the nape of his neck. "All we want is for you to be happy. You know that."

"Yes, but you also don't want me to annoy you." Draco caught her eye, and blinked a little at what he saw there. "I *know* that, Mother. And I don't mind. If I had thought I was annoying you more than my presence here was worth, I would have left the first time you complained about my complaining."

"I don't know how you became what you are," his mother whispered to him in return. "The events of the last five years of your life...I'm shut out from them. Oh, you sent me letters," she added, anticipating Draco's protest before he could make it. "But I don't think you told me half of what happened to you in them."

Draco shrugged a little. How could he have? His parents would be horrified by some of what he had done, like having sex with non-pure-bloods or mountain-skimming, and the rest of it was simply tedious for them, the way Draco's complaints about his boredom were.

"We do want to give you the best life possible," Narcissa said.

"I know," Draco said. "But right now, the best way to do that is simply to stand back and let me have my fun with Potter. One way or another, it'll be over soon enough. I can't keep it up long, this raging at him, and neither can he."

Narcissa placed one hand on her hip and studied the view of Potter out the window, still casting curses as if he had all the time and all the strength in the world. "It looks as though he has more stamina than most," she muttered.

Draco thought about some of the ways Potter might have stamina, and that combined with his earlier thoughts about Potter's shoulders, and perhaps even his thoughts about fire in Potter's eyes. He ended up coughing, while his ears turned hot enough that his mother could surely *see*.

"If it's like that, then," Narcissa said, and her voice had deepened and grown knowing in a way that Draco just didn't *need* to hear. She touched Draco's shoulder, squeezing hard. "I hope you know what you're doing, Draco."

"I know," Draco said, and decided to see how much he could trust his mother with. "Even if it ends up leading to me sleeping with Potter."

A long pause, and then his mother said, "Well. I suppose it will not damage you any more than most of the other affairs you've had. You *have* learned how to sleep casually with people and part with them to head for the other side of the world the next day."

Draco turned around and smiled madly at her, his fingers closing hard into his palms. He sincerely doubted that any fling between himself and Potter would *ever* be casual, but then again, he had yet to be near Potter without a murder attempt or a frustrating conversation that made the murder attempts almost preferable happening. So perhaps they would never have the chance to experience what it would be like, casual or intense.

“Yes, perhaps the other side of the world would be best,” his mother continued thoughtfully as she made her way towards the door of his room. “Australia, say, or New Zealand.”

Draco nodded in silent agreement as she shut the door and left him to his contemplation of Potter. Potter had backed up and was eying the wards like a bull about to charge. Draco didn’t know what spell he intended to try next, but he knew it wouldn’t do the wards any good.

And ultimately, it was his money, his to inherit after his father’s, that would go to repair the wards. For the sake of his family, Draco had to give in and go down.

And for others’ sakes, too, of course, but he didn’t see the need to emphasize that.

\*

“Malfoy.”

Potter’s voice still simmered and glowed with anger, and it had been almost two hours since Draco had bridled and broken the horse. Draco stopped behind the frame of the gates and admired, for a moment, the sweat on Potter’s cheeks and the way his hair hung over his forehead, and hoped that that might be it, that he might not have to break the chain ritual.

No, he decided, in the end. Potter might retain his change for a few days, but then he would go back to drifting cluelessness, or an in-between state of confusion that would reward no one. He might even stir up his friends against Draco. He always *had* when he acted the part of helpless victim before.

“I’ll make you a bargain, Potter,” he said.

Potter rolled his eyes and backed up another step, wand ready in his hand. His feet danced in place for a moment before he controlled them. Draco had to lick his lips at the thought of what that passion might be like in bed. “Says the man who I have cornered.”

“Not so,” Draco said, and gestured around to the Manor. “I’m home, here. I can stay here as long as I want to, and in the meantime, what will you do? Hammer on the wards until my parents call your fellow Aurors in? People who know you well?” He smiled at Potter, pleasantly. “And will surely notice when you suddenly go from raging passion back to idiot apathy.”

Potter closed his eyes, then opened them again, as though hoping he would go back to idiot apathy right there. But the flame was still in his face when he looked at Draco, and he tightened his fingers on his wand. Draco decided to keep a step back in case Potter wanted to beat him over the head with it. “You have no idea what it was really like,” Potter whispered. “You have no idea who I really am.”

“I don’t need to know who you really are to make a bargain with you,” Draco said. “Since you probably wouldn’t want to tell me anyway.”

Potter's eyes narrowed, and he twisted his head to the side, watching Draco as though he wanted to hit him. "You have *no idea* who you're dealing with, is what I mean," he said, after a few seconds of a charged silence. "You have no idea what I might agree to, or whether I would even keep my word."

"This is the bargain," Draco continued, because he saw no need to answer such twaddle. "You don't try to interfere with me while I fight the next creature, whatever it is, and I give you the silver horsehair back."

Potter blinked, once, twice. Then he said, "I *told* you that what each animal gives you is the key to fighting the other one." He was already slowing down, Draco saw in disgust, his mouth drooping a little at the sides. "You wouldn't give that to me because then you would have no way to complete destroying the chain ritual."

Draco shrugged. "You're more of a problem than I expect the other magical creatures to be, given what I've defeated so far," he said, honestly. "Your interference—or rather, the *lack* of it—is something I'm prepared to bargain for."

Potter watched him with wondering eyes. Draco tried to appear innocent but not too innocent. There was no way Potter would believe *that*.

"But that means you're still going to go ahead and try to disrupt the chain ritual," Potter said, as slowly as though he thought *Draco* was the one who needed extra help. "Even though I told you I didn't want you to."

"Right," Draco said. He thought of many more things that he could say, but in the end, it seemed better to drawl the words and hold Potter's eyes, so he could fill in the missing details for himself.

Potter scowled at him. "But why would you care what I feel like? Okay, so I could have confessed the secret of the chain ritual to someone else instead of you and really got myself in trouble. But I didn't. So why the fuck does it still matter?"

Draco sighed. "Don't you remember what I said to you when you were choking me? Or did the spell do something to your memory to turn it into cheese, along with your moods?"

"It's *not* cheese!" Potter snapped, his cheeks darkening with a flood of color that soared up along his neck.

"My mistake," Draco said. "Cream, then."

Potter closed his eyes and did the sort of counting trick under his breath to recover his temper that never worked, as far as Draco knew. At least, it only made his mother angrier when he was a child and she'd tried it. Draco waited with his hands barely touching, the tips of his fingers resting against each other. He could do this all day, he thought. He wondered whether Potter could.

"You said that certain things should always be true," Potter said, opening his eyes and staring at him. "That Voldemort should always be dead, and I should always be—well, whatever you said, it didn't make sense."

"Ah," Draco said. "So the spell also caused you to be unable to take compliments." Then he paused and studied the various shades of red Potter's cheeks had turned, and shook his head. "No, perhaps only exaggerated the tendency. I remember now that you never *did* take them gracefully,

whether it was Skeeter giving them to you or someone else.”

“She never complimented me,” Potter snapped.

“Which only goes to show that you have trouble even *recognizing* them,” Draco said. “Oh, dear.”

Potter’s hand trembled, and Draco raised his own hands in placation. If this went far enough, he suspected that he wouldn’t ever get his bargain from Potter. “All right,” he said. “So, the bargain I want to make.”

“No.” When Potter spoke like that, Draco could picture him knocking down the wards and making a triumphal entrance to the Manor. “I still want to know what you meant by—some things always existing.”

“You’re a symbol to me,” Draco said, and shook his head when Potter’s eyes almost crossed trying to see his own scar. “Not for the reasons that you are to anyone else. You defied the Dark Lord, and I didn’t think anyone could do that. I was scared to the point of shaking in my boots just from *looking* at him, and he didn’t much care about me. Oh, he wouldn’t have mourned if I died in the ‘performance of my duties,’ but he didn’t actively want to kill me. You, he did. But you spat in his face and walked away. I didn’t understand how anyone could be that way. It’s nothing to do with being a hero, or even courageous,” he added, when Potter started to open his mouth. “It has to do with being beautiful. That’s the way you looked to me, beautiful. The way a storm is, you know, or a free wild animal.”

Potter stared at him with his mouth open, then snapped it shut hard enough to rattle his teeth. When he finally spoke again, he sounded as though he would start spitting the teeth out. “Fine, Malfoy. Then don’t tell me your real reason.”

“And deprived you of your ability to recognize the truth, too,” Draco muttered.

“Do you want your bloody bargain or not?” Potter roared.

*I want you to keep roaring like that*, Draco thought, but it would only strike Potter as daft if he said it, so he didn’t intend to say it. He gave a little shrug instead, and murmured, “All right. You don’t interfere with me when I go to fight the next animal, I give you the silver horsehair.”

Potter studied his face once more. Draco just stood there. What could he do other than try and look innocent? It wasn’t like he could take any more jabs at Potter without the man turning tail.

But Draco had started to think the majority of those jabs were true. Potter had lost his memory, and his sense of humor, and control of his emotions, and everything else that made Draco remember, fondly, the boy who had circled opposite the Dark Lord and made him look like a fool.

Who had shown Draco that he had been jumping at shadows, afraid of nothing.

Potter nodded brusquely. “But I’m going to stay here until you bring me the horsehair,” he said.

Draco shrugged. “I have it here.” He opened the pouch at his belt and removed the thin strip of shining softness. He was surprised at how good a job he had done, with the spells he cast. He tossed it at Potter’s feet.

Potter made a snatch at it with one hand, and then straightened back up, waving his wand to float

the thing to him. Draco laughed. “Too good to touch the dirt, Potter? I see that the chain ritual has given you a sense of cleanliness, then. That might be the first good thing it ever did for you.”

Potter looked at him. There was something in his gaze that made Draco look down, something in his words that sounded like the teeth he hadn’t spat out when he said, “It’s not like I ever *wanted* to be dirty. I had to stop caring about that early in my life.”

Draco swallowed, his stomach squirming. “I apologize, Potter.”

There was something...different about that, he thought. Insults to Potter’s memory and all the rest of it were one thing, but this was something else, something that went deeper into Potter’s eyes than he was prepared to deal with.

After watching him with his head cocked on one side, Potter seemed to accept that Draco meant it, and nodded shortly. “Fine,” he said, brushing grains of dirt from his horsehair. “You have your bargain. Although I don’t know how you’re going to get along, without this to protect you when you face the next creature.”

“That’s not your problem now,” Draco said, and took a step away, and started to Apparate.

Potter’s hand on his arm stopped him. Draco looked at him. Potter was biting his lip.

“Maybe I should—maybe I should go along, just to make sure you’re not *too* badly hurt,” he said.

Draco had to bite his own lip, hard. When would Potter remember that he shouldn’t have made a bargain with a Slytherin?

“Thank you, Potter,” he said, all on his dignity. “I appreciate that.”

Potter drew him close, and Draco shut his eyes and leaned against his chest. It felt warmer than he had thought it would, at least when Potter had drowned his passion in the chain ritual.

*I reckon he’s just warm all over.*

And didn’t *that* thought feed Draco entertaining fantasies as they disappeared.

## The Blue Eagle

Draco came out of the Apparition in a stunning place. Well, he assumed that Potter did so as well, but he was probably at least a little more used to it.

They stood on the edge of an immense mountain, towering and jagged. Draco could see the scars of the cliff face falling away beneath him, and the snow that had gathered here and there on ledges. No snow was drifting around them at the moment, though. Besides the view, which looked out on glittering wastes of stone, the stunning thing was the blue sky above them, hard as a hammer blow.

Draco stared in several directions, and saw more mountains. No, wait a minute, far below there was a glimpse of green. He had no idea where they were. He had seen some magnificent mountain ranges in his travels, but he hadn't seen all of them, and for all he knew, some of this landscape could be an illusion, the way the marble palace holding the dog had been.

*No, not illusion. Part of the spell.*

Draco vowed privately to bother Potter more about the chain ritual and the book it had come out of when he could, later, after the destruction of the ritual's components was complete and Potter was responding like a normal human being. It must have been immensely powerful to create all this. Potter's magic had probably played a part in it, too, but the instructions that could do this...Draco wanted to see them.

"Aren't you going to do something?"

Draco blinked and looked at Potter. Potter stood with his arms folded and his lower lip clamped between very white teeth, looking as though he wanted Draco to speak so he could know what his private opinion on this mountain range was. Draco raised his eyebrows a little and looked more closely at the mountains.

"That would depend entirely on what is coming to attack me," he told Potter. "If it's a goat, or something else that can leap and survive on these cliffs, then I reckon I'll have to find some secure footing before I can attack it."

"You talk about it so casually," Potter said in a low voice. "Like they're not living animals, they're just parts of a ritual to you."

Draco stared at him for a little while. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Potter, they *are* just parts of a ritual. I didn't see you mourning before, when I destroyed the horse and the bird and the dog."

"I didn't have enough emotion to do it then," Potter admitted grudgingly. "I reckon you can be proud of that, that you've changed me enough to feel sorry you have to destroy them."

"Well, resent yourself for being stupid enough to bring them to life in the first place," Draco said, and tilted his head back to scan the skies. He saw no sign of a four-legged animal, which left the sky as a logical place for his enemy to live. "If you hadn't done that ritual, and done one that would destroy all your self-preservation and ability to keep quiet—"



He cut himself off with a sharp cry, and dropped flat to the stone. The bird above him had drifted so quietly closer that Draco hadn't heard a thing, and now it was cutting towards him, talons spread wide to strike. It might have taken out his eyes if Draco hadn't turned his head in the right way just at that moment.

The strike failed, and Draco heard the bird scream in frustration above him as it banked. He rolled over to stare at it. It must have other tactics, he thought. The enemies got harder as he went along, and this was attacking too much like the golden bird at the moment.

It was certainly different in appearance. It looked like an ordinary eagle, at least a little, but Draco could see the deep, satiny blue of the feathers, and the glowing eyes, a combination of cobalt and cerulean. It craned its head around and screamed at him again, the fine azure feathers on its neck mantling. Black marked the edges of its feathers, splashes like ink that made Draco want to take a picture.

Of course, finding his enemy beautiful didn't mean that he wasn't going to fight as hard as he could to free Potter's heart. It just meant he got more aesthetic enjoyment than he had thought he would out of doing so.

He raised his wand, and cast a bubble net, a chained series of silver links that were joined at the weak points with tiny, bright spheres. The eagle shrieked and came around again, chopping towards the net with a confidence that told Draco it expected nothing less than a net of adamant to be capable of holding it.

And maybe that would even have been true. But this particular spell was one that Draco had learned from a drunken spellcrafter who he'd supported for a while in Rome, and Draco was forming a theory about the magic that the animals could break through and resist—namely, that it had to be magic Potter was familiar with.

Time to find out, Draco thought, as he spread the net out in front of the diving raptor.

The eagle slammed into it and immediately screamed, its wings fanning out as it tried to rise again. The links tangled around its talons, though, and the spheres floated the entire net into the air, dropping it down and folding it in. The eagle was crying out in a minute from the inside of a dense cage, and its wings cleaved the air and its beak opened and shut and its eyes were wild enough to break the heart.

Draco bowed his head in its direction, and turned to face Potter. "Do you still doubt that I can destroy this bird without the silver horsehair?"

Potter put his hand over his mouth. Draco knew that motion, would have known it anywhere, although until this moment he hadn't realized he could remember it from Hogwarts. It was meant to conceal a smile.

He whipped around, and realized that the eagle was rising in spite of his spell, carrying all the massive weight of the net on its back, between its wings. The net swayed and clashed and jangled, and it wouldn't fly very fast, but up here, it just needed to go high, not fast. Draco would have wanted to experiment with the wind currents here, the way he had in the Pyrenees, before using the Hermes Charm.

Draco jumped up anyway, casting the charm on his ankles alone. So he wouldn't do any mountain-skimming, he would just fly up and after the eagle until he—

The eagle turned its head and fixed him with one stunning eye. In response, a wind whirled out of the sky and pinned Draco to the ledge he had first appeared on with Potter.

Draco gasped and twisted, trying to get his feet under him. But the tiny wings beating on his ankles distorted his sense of balance, and spread his legs out when he tried to stand, and in general were a nuisance and a half. Draco tossed his hair out of his eyes and stared upwards again. The eagle and the net were already almost out of sight.

“That’s the part you would need the horsehair for,” Potter said mildly. “And even then, you would have trouble catching up and fastening the hair where it needs to go.” He patted the pocket he’d put the horsehair into.

*Fastening*, Draco thought. *Thank you for telling me, Potter*. He nodded a little. “Well, I suppose I’ll have to make do without it,” he said, and took the horsehair from his own pouch on his belt again.

Potter gaped at him in a most gratifying way. Then he said, “What are you thinking, Malfoy?” He looked back at his own pocket, and took out the shimmering length Draco had given him earlier. “Do you think you’re going to fool it with an imitation?”

Draco shrugged. “Why not?” he asked, enjoying the way Potter’s eyes kept straying back to the hair he held as if it were going to suddenly Transfigure itself. “I managed to fool you.”

Maybe he shouldn’t have said it, but it felt so *good*, and the setup was so perfect. And the way Potter gaped at him, his hand falling open and the fake hair that Draco had imbued with glamours tumbling towards the ground, was so perfect that Draco knew he would visit it again and again in his dreams.

For now, he winked and sprang up, after the eagle, again, casting a Tracking Charm that would orient him to the silver spheres on the net.

He heard Potter’s warning roar behind him, knew that he was aiming for his back, and that he would use the Hermes Charm. He had lost the chance for Potter’s non-interference when he revealed that he had traded Potter a fake horsehair. Draco closed his fist tight on the real hair and turned to look back.

Potter had conjured wings on his ankles and also on his wrists, more daring than Draco would have dared to be in the circumstances. His jaw was set, his eyes filled with fire.

Draco smiled at him, and called a wind like the one the eagle had used on him. He couldn’t have used this tactic in the desert, where there was no obstacle to pin Potter against, but it worked perfectly well here.

Potter spluttered as he was slammed against the rock behind him. Draco wove the wind charm with careful little passes of his wand, so that Potter would be safe but not able to get out against the almost-strangling pressure put on him, and then turned gracefully for the sky.

The tracking charm called to him, constantly crooning in his ear, and becoming louder and clearer the higher he got, until Draco cast *Finite* at it because the high-pitched sound was driving him mad. Besides, he could see the eagle now, no longer invisible against the sky it almost matched in color. The merry jingling of the silver spheres on the net it tugged along sang to him, urging him

on.

The eagle craned its neck towards him and screamed in fury. Within seconds it was flying away again, higher and higher. Draco accelerated. He had no idea why it wasn't using its wind magic to stop him, but he wanted to get as close as he could before it did.

Then a blast came and caught him.

Draco pulled his legs in close to his body as the wind spun and mauled him, trying to tug his hair off his head, it seemed like, and yanking at the hand he'd clasped around the silver horsehair. He rotated wildly in place, and tears flew away from his eyes like long streamers of salt water, and he was gasping, and his throat hurt, and it felt as if he might collapse to the ground and expire any second.

But his lips formed themselves into a grin, despite all the pressure of the air on his face that seemed like it was meant to keep his mouth still.

He was born for moments like this, when he was at the opposite end of the scale from bored.

He tucked in his arms and folded up in a fetal position. The magic of the Hermes Charm reacted, and he dropped like an eagle himself towards the distant peaks of the mountains. He heard the bird shriek above him, in what sounded like honest exasperation.

Draco pulled up and spread all four limbs the moment he was out of the current of wind the eagle had used. Then he soared up again, and this time stretched out parallel, for the insane burst of speed that he had used in racing away from Potter in the desert.

He rose, and rose, and rose, and was next to the eagle before it had worked more than one talon free from the clinging silver net. It screamed again, and Draco swung out with the silver horsehair, not releasing it but making the broadest gesture he could with it, trusting that it would know what to do.

The horsehair shivered and expanded, the loop spreading out until it encompassed most of the sky. Draco thought it would miss the eagle for a minute—how could it catch the bird, when it was so big?—but then the hair swirled, and the loop settled on the eagle's neck and began to shrink.

The eagle tossed its head and brought its beak down on the horsehair. Draco tensed, then relaxed as he realized that the eagle was powerless to sever the thing. Of course it was; by the rules of the ritual, it couldn't break free of the one thing that could conquer it.

But the eagle didn't break apart, either, the way the horse had done when Draco bridled it. Instead, it tipped its head back and spread its feet wide, finally cracking Draco's silver net down the middle and shedding it. The silver spheres clacked mournfully together as it fell towards the earth.

And Draco found himself connected by only the silver rope to the eagle, which opened its beak as wide as it could and then flew away faster than he had known anything could fly. Draco barely had time to wrap the rope around his wrists and hang on.

He was towed, he was shaken, he was flapping like another wing, and meanwhile the eagle soared up and up, into air higher than Draco had ever attained in Quidditch, while his ears popped and his lungs roared.

When Draco could get enough of the thin height to take a breath, he exploded into a whoop of joyous laughter.

The eagle jerked as though Draco had just jabbed a pin into its arse, and then screamed loud enough to make Draco's ears pop again. It turned around, beak sawing one more time at the horsehair. As Draco had suspected, this made not a whit of difference. He was using the chain ritual's own rules against it now, and it felt better than he could ever have thought it would.

The eagle hung one more moment in midair, like an enormous hummingbird, its wings loud enough to rival the scream.

Then it dived down the length of the hair like a misguided kite coming down its string, straight at Draco's face.

Draco shouldn't have dared to take a hand away from the rope in order to grab his wand, but he had dared many other less rational things in his life, and he thought grabbing his wand when a giant bird that wanted to kill him was coming at his eyes was supremely rational. He coiled his body to the side to avoid the rush of wind the eagle flung ahead of it, and jammed the wand out.

The eagle's breast feathers collided with it, and immediately the eagle brought its talons up, trying to clench them into the delicate skin around Draco's wrist and take the wand. Or maybe break the wand. Draco didn't know what was going through the brains of magical eagles made from a ritual.

Draco hissed out a spell that his mother would have been horrified to realize he knew, an instant before the eagle's claws broke skin.

The spell struck into the eagle's breast, between the feathers, and split it in half, from chest to tail. The bloody chunks of the bird wavered for a long second, almost upright, almost still joined by a strip of skin. Draco blinked, and they faded, wavered, were gone, disappearing just the way the crushed dog's body under the stone from the ceiling had. All that was left was a pure blue scrap of satin cloth, fluttering on the wind before the wind whipped it away, and it faded into the sky it was the color of.

And something else, something small, plummeting towards the mountains far below. The tip of the eagle's beak.

Well, and there was also the matter of the silver rope that connected to nothing now, and the way Draco was falling. The wings on his ankles took care of that before long, though, and turned his fall into a dive. He kept his eyes wide open, locked on the falling tip of eagle beak.

Something else sped away from the mountains to intercept it.

Potter.

Draco stared, and then nodded. Of course. He had wondered why Potter hadn't shown up before to interfere in the battle. He must have decided Draco would best his latest champion and that the best course he could take was—

To do exactly what he did, which was to scoop the falling bit of eagle beak out of the air and hold it up for Draco to see, panting. The wings on his wrists and ankles supported him, fanning wildly, as he stared up at Draco with his eyes blazing. Draco couldn't breathe, and not because of the height he hung at or the speed he was traveling. He had never seen *anything* so beautiful as that fire.

Then Potter Apparated.

And Draco had no idea where he had gone.

## The White Map

Draco knocked and waited. Then he cursed and knocked again. Most of the time, he found it useful to have friends, but he had to admit there were times when they made life *bloody* inconvenient.

Despite the second knock, and then the third, it was still long minutes before Pansy came to the door. When she opened it, Draco understood. She wore a languid puff of silk that was only a dress because people chose to call it that, and she watched him with raised eyebrows and her hair dangling in long, loose curls down her back.

"So who is it?" Draco demanded, stepping into her large entrance hall and shutting the door behind him.

Pansy rolled her eyes. "No one you know, and no one worth staying in bed for."

"Really?" Draco grinned at her. "You took long enough to answer the door that I assumed he was at least skilled."

"I took long enough because you *woke me up*," Pansy said, and every word was sharp, precise, as if edged with diamond dust. She turned back to the drawing room she'd come out of, and Draco followed. The rich colors around him, pinks and pale lavenders, glowed in the sunlight coming through the window. "Now. I got your ridiculous letter about Potter. What did he do now?"

Draco pressed a hand to his heart. "What makes you think my visit has anything to do with that?"

"Because you've been out of England for five years and only wrote me when I sent you Howlers." Pansy turned around and put her hands on her hips. "I'm not going to be *patient* with this load of bollocks, Draco. Tell me. Now."

Draco sighed. He had forgotten that most of his Continental friends liked being teased more than Pansy did. "He got hold of the next component of the chain ritual that I need and Apparated Merlin knows where."

"Careless of you to let him do that." Pansy shook her head and tapped her fingers on her hips, making the silk rustle. "I suppose you want me to locate him for you?"

Draco crept closer and looked at her from the corner of his eye. "No one can do that as well as you can."

"I accept that as truth *and* flattery," Pansy said. "It's just lucky for you that I'm in the mood for that particular mixture of both. Come on." She turned and marched deeper into the house, through the drawing room and a door that led into a long corridor with rooms and stairs leading off it. Draco had never found out where all of them gone, just as he had never found out where Pansy had got the money to purchase this huge house after the war. He was glad she was here, though. If she had been at her parents' house, she would have been leading the decorous life she pretended to lead, and he couldn't have counted on her help.

Pansy stepped at last into a little dark lab that Professor Snape might have appreciated, although the vials on the shelves held mostly completed potions and the equipment on the tables wasn't

meant for brewing, precisely. "I suppose you *do* have Potter's hair, or something similarly close to him, that I can use?" Pansy asked, opening a cupboard briskly.

"Uh," Draco admitted.

Pansy sighed so deeply that her dress almost came off. "Well, the fact that you were close to him and probably picked up some trace of his magical signature will have to be enough, then," she muttered, and whirled towards him, drawing her wand. "Stand still."

Draco did so while she stroked the wand over his forehead and around his hair, muttering and frowning to herself all the while. When she took it back, Draco couldn't see anything clinging to the tip, but it still glinted as Pansy carefully brushed it across the inside of a copper dish lined with obsidian.

"Good enough," said Pansy, after a critical stare at the pan, and reached out to snap her fingers at the table. Draco jumped as a flame sprang to life through a hole in it, and then shook his head at her.

"Show-off."

"While you were learning mountain-skimming and how to drink trolls under the table, I was learning this," Pansy said, and bent over the pan. Draco thought about saying something as her hair almost fell into it, but Pansy pushed it back behind her ears and raised her eyebrows at him in a way that said she knew what he was thinking and didn't appreciate it. Draco dutifully pinched his lips shut and watched instead as she stirred her wand back and forth inside the pan. "Hmmm."

That was all she said, while Draco waited patiently with his hands behind his back, not touching any of the equipment in the lab, because he remembered what Pansy had written him about that. Pansy's frown grew deeper as she waited, but she didn't give up, and indeed came back to him and traced her wand around his hands, wrists, and legs, going back to the pan with something invisible except when it fell into the obsidian each time.

"Did he ever touch you?" Pansy finally demanded as she arched her neck and studied the far side of the pan critically.

"He held me close to Apparate me," Draco said.

"That's enough, then," Pansy said, and plunged her wand into the pan. It had been empty a moment before, or so Draco would have sworn, but now she pulled her wand back with something seething and white on the end. As Draco stared in fascination--he had read her descriptions of the process, but it was still strange to see--Pansy whipped her wand at another pan on the other end of the table, this one brass.

The white coil flew into it and shimmered, curling up until it resembled a sheet of parchment, and then uncurling to show that it *was* a sheet of parchment. Pansy gave a grudging nod and walked over to pick it up.

"Not the best I've ever done," she murmured, turning the paper back and forth and watching the edges of it as though she thought it would crumble apart in her hands. "You rushed me too much for that, Draco. If you would have gone more slowly and let me--"

Draco took the map from her without caring. It was a blank white parchment except for a small

black dot in the center. As Draco watched, names appeared near the dot. The one right beside it said *The Burrow*, and beyond that was another labeled *Ottery St. Catchpole*.

Draco relaxed and snorted. "He's gone to the Weasleys. I might have known." Or perhaps he could be excused for not knowing, he had to admit. It hadn't seemed *likely* that Potter would go back to his friends when he was still under the influence of the chain ritual. He had tried so hard to keep them out of this before now, and he would have a hard job explaining the bit of eagle beak in his possession.

"Well, you didn't know, or you wouldn't have come here." Pansy folded her arms. "And this is the *last* time I help you with something this mad, Draco. You're on your own from now on."

"Darling Pansy." Draco took her by the arms and smiled into her face. "You've given me the help that I most needed, in the hour of my crisis. I admire you more than I can say. No one else could have learned to create maps from the mere trace of a magical signature. I--"

"When will you send me the Galleons?"

Draco stopped and pressed his hand over his heart again. "A lot of people are *happy* to receive the romantic coin that I pay them in, I tell you."

"And I'm not one of them." Pansy reached out and flicked him in the middle of his forehead with her long nails, enough to hurt, or at least make Draco wince. "I just want to know when you'll send me the Galleons."

"It might take another week to end this business with Potter," Draco said, and stepped back to nurse his injured dignity. "Or at least make sure that he doesn't set up another chain ritual the minute I stop this one. I'll get you the money then."

"Why do you care so much?" Pansy was studying him as though he was again the boy she'd thought about marrying when they were both children. "You know that he'll curse you for interrupting this, not be thankful. And I never thought you cared that much about achieving Potter's thanks, anyway."

"I don't," Draco said. "Not his gratitude. His attention, and the way that he glared at me when he realized I was winning the battles and that I tricked him to win this latest one...yes, that I think I want."

"You *think* you want them, and you chase him and his magical animals over half England? Or beyond that, since I don't think some of the places you mentioned were in England?" Pansy shook her head. "I'm glad I'm not you. And not male."

"Well, someday you'll meet someone who'll risk that much for you," Draco told her magnanimously. "Not your husband, but someone else."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Maybe, but that isn't the sweet compliment that you mean it to be, Draco, not when I've *seen* what you think it's worth risking your life for."

"I leave you with the money I have on me, then, since all the compliments I can pay you go wrong," Draco said sadly, and handed over a clinking bundle of money wrapped in a handkerchief. Pansy juggled it in one hand and nodded to him, turning to go back upstairs.



"Good luck on your mad journey, and good luck in keeping Potter's attention for longer than it takes the next Dark wizard to cross his path," she called over her shoulder.

Draco smiled when she wasn't there to see anymore. He had his own plans for keeping Potter's eyes fixed firmly on him, and if it would take a little more work than he had anticipated when he first attacked the chain ritual...well, at least that meant he wouldn't have the *time* for boredom. That was enough to keep him whistling as he walked out of Pansy's house, checked the map one more time to make sure Potter hadn't moved, and then Apparated.

\*

Draco had thought about sneaking up on the Burrow or waiting for Potter to leave, as he probably would when the influence of Draco's battles faded and he began to fall back into apathy again, but he found he hated the thought of time undoing all his gains and making Potter collapse into that will-less automaton again. Besides, his friends might keep him there when they realized how much was wrong with him, and Draco didn't have the time to wait.

There was only one way to satisfy his own craving for Potter's attention and make sure that Potter couldn't use his friends as a refuge from Draco, and Draco put it into action by marching up and knocking boldly on the front door.

It opened at once; the Weasleys must have been expecting someone else. And in the middle of the doorway was the original Weasel, his head turned back over his shoulder as he mumbled incoherently through a mouthful of meat and bones. Draco managed to make out something about, "Leave it here."

"I came to remove something, not leave something," Draco said.

To a pleasure so intense that it made his body shake, five years hadn't diminished the Weasel's reaction to his voice. He whipped around and nearly stuck his wand up Draco's nostrils. It was a shame that Draco didn't know any spells he could cast with bogeys alone. He moved a step back and smiled politely. "Just give me Potter, and I'll leave," he said.

"*Malfoy*." Weasley still made his surname sound less desirable than black plague, and Draco hummed in contentment. It was good for some things never to change. "What the fuck do you think Harry has to do with you?"

"I've been breaking down the chain ritual that he established to enslave his heart," Draco said. "With that much invested in him, I think I have a right to at least talk to him." He paused and laid his hand on his heart again when Weasley's mouth fell open. "Oh, dear, he didn't confide that in you when he came here to hide? How unlike a brave Gryffindor."

There was a scrambling sound behind Weasley--Draco chose to think of it as the sound of someone pushing back a table they'd hidden under--and Potter stormed up beside his friend. Draco was pleased to see that his teeth were still grinding and his eyes had the look of a forest fire in progress, despite the hours that had passed between the time he'd Apparated and now.

"You don't have any right to come here, *Malfoy*," Potter said. His voice was low enough not to qualify it as a bark, but it was still grating. "*None*. Take your lies and *get out*."

"They're not lies, as you know very well," Draco said, standing tall because he wanted to. "You did create a chain ritual that promised to save the world at the small price of your heart. And then you

didn't tell anyone else. Maybe you don't remember it now, but I'm sure at the time, you knew your friends would interfere. You *predicted* them interfering. You never thought I would, but, well." He shrugged a little, charmingly. "None of us can predict all the tedious necessities of life."

"What chain ritual?" Granger's face poked through the gap behind Harry, although Draco knew her more by her voice than anything else. He couldn't catch even a glimpse of frizzy hair from this angle. "What is he saying, Harry?"

"Lies." Potter's eyes never wavered from Draco's face, and Draco smiled a little, impressed despite himself with how hate-filled Potter could be. "The way he always does, the way he *always will*. He has to make himself important even now, when it *doesn't matter*. We haven't seen each other for years, and he hasn't cared about what I do for years. Why does he suddenly care now? For *no reason*, except that he wants to annoy me."

Draco planted a hand over his heart. "I am shocked, tragically shocked," he said. "Why don't you show them that piece of eagle's beak, Potter? How are you going to explain that? Do you regularly go eagle hunting on the weekends for fun?"

He was watching, and saw Potter's fingers twitch towards his pocket. So he knew to move his own wand behind his back in the Summoning Charm, and since he had learned a long time ago how to perform that one nonverbally--it was *so* useful when he didn't want to wake up the snoring person beside him and didn't want to get out of bed to fetch the Hangover Potion--the bit of beak flew up and out of Potter's pocket before he could prevent it.

Potter snarled at him and grabbed for the beak. Draco snatched it and turned it back and forth.

"No chain ritual?" he asked. "I'm lying? Why don't you tell your friends what this is, then, and what it was doing in your pocket, and why you care so much that I have it?"

Weasley and Granger had turned their searching eyes on Potter now--eyes full of faith, of course. Draco doubted he could convince them all in a moment that their precious friend had done something wrong. What he *could* do was make sure that they didn't let him off the hook. Potter was a horrible liar. Draco cast a charm that would make the bit of beak stick to the lining of his own pocket, and smiled pleasantly.

"That's something I recovered that he was trying to steal," Potter said. "He's back in England after five years, suddenly. Why? What reason except to try and cause mischief? And this is an object that a friend of his stole five years ago and hid. Now Malfoy is here, trying to profit from it."

Draco raised an eyebrow. That was more innovative than he had expected Potter to be, and he thought the lie might have worked. If he hadn't turned red the minute he began speaking, of course, and kept calling the bit of eagle's beak the "object" and the "something." If he had known that much about the case, to work it as an Auror, he would speak the name.

Weasley looked as if he wanted to be convinced anyway, but Granger was speaking. "All right, but how did you find out about this, Harry? I thought you were working a different case." She paused, then added, "And I don't know...you said something the other day about Dark Lords and how they wouldn't trouble Britain anymore, and there was that abrupt change in the rumors--"

Potter turned to deal with his friends. Draco backed a step away, then another quiet one. Even Weasley looked as if he had better things to do right now than rush Draco. Draco moved off, until he was beyond the anti-Apparition wards, and cleared his throat.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"Thanks," Draco said, to Potter for being helpful and his friends for being helpful in a different way, and Apparated.

Potter's rather musical roar of rage was unfortunately cut short as he did.

## The Scarlet Snake

Draco gasped aloud as he came out into the middle of a dark tunnel, and spent a few seconds blinking around. For some reason, after fighting the horse and eagle in open spaces, he had assumed that the site of the next battle would also be open country, a magnificent landscape that he couldn't help admiring even as he worked to destroy the next component of Potter's chain ritual.

Instead, he was looking at what could have been a sewer. Draco wrinkled his nose as he studied the thin trickle of brown water making its way down the middle of the tunnel. It led through sculptured stone, and that made him wonder if someone human had made this place.

Then again, who knew where the silver horse's desert and the blue eagle's mountains had been? Potter's magic, or the powerful chain ritual, could have created them the way it did the dog's palace.

Draco rose to his feet and reached his hands out before and behind him, the *Lumos* Charm on his wand illuminating rough stone on the walls. Those walls curved inwards, but seemed fairly sturdy, thank Merlin. Draco peered closely at them. No colors, and no threads of ore, either. This wasn't a mine.

A long, low sound, curiously soft, came to his ears as he stood there trying to decide if he wanted to walk ahead or wait for Potter to arrive and then decide what to do next based on his reactions to the place.

Draco whipped around, leveling his wand at the floor. His instincts had picked up on what the sound meant before they let his conscious mind know, it seemed. And a moment later, he was rewarded when he saw the flat, triangular head and the long body that followed behind, scarlet banded with black.

Draco had rarely seen such a magnificent snake, and certainly not this close. Nagini didn't count, not when she was partly a magical creature and the Dark Lord's pet. This snake had golden eyes and a long, tapered tail that tapped the ground now and then as it considered Draco.

"Hello," Draco said. "I don't know if it'll matter much, but I *was* Sorted into the House of the Snake when I was at school."

The serpent coiled a little closer to him. The intense colors glowed like a tongue of flame, and Draco found himself wondering which object Potter had used to make it. Then he shook his head. Not that it mattered, and he was being silly, letting himself get distracted like this.

The snake apparently didn't like his headshake. Its neck rose, and its tongue flickered out as though it was testing the air for his scent. Draco took another step forwards, starting to draw the bit of eagle beak out of his pocket. He had no idea how it was supposed to help him with this particular challenge, but he would never know if he just stood there with it hidden from sight like an idiot.

The snake struck, fast as Potter on a broom, before Draco could get his hand all the way out of his pocket. But Draco had annoyed one of his lovers, Bruno, several times, and he could move like that when he was annoyed, too. Draco's Bruno-trained reflexes came into play before he could even think about it, and he leaped into the air and off to the side, grimacing as he heard his boots

come down with a splash into the middle of that brown water.

But better dirty boots than a bite on the leg from those wicked-looking fangs the snake now turned its head to display.

Well. Draco *thought* so, at least. There was a small chance that the poison would make him feel delicious and tingly and then not do him any harm, like the venom of a fairy garter snake he'd tried a few years ago. But he didn't want to risk it.

The serpent pulled its head back and stared at Draco from those golden eyes, so bright that Draco found himself grinning in spite of his anger. He darted out his hand and stroked it across the snake's head. It hissed and snapped wildly at him, but Draco was out of reach again. He bowed a little to the snake.

"Shall we find out what this does?" he asked, and held the bit of eagle's beak up.

It seemed that it was a weapon to conquer the snake, rather than a key, because it promptly lowered its head and looked for a moment as though it might slink away. Then it edged closer, head turned to the side. As if, Draco thought, it wanted to protect its throat, or something else...

Something that might well be its head right below the point where the head melted into the neck--what would have been the chin on a different kind of animal.

Draco danced back a step, as though he was going to throw the bit of eagle's beak elsewhere, and then ran up to the snake. Again the snake hissed; Draco could almost see the bits of saliva flying away from its tongue. But he was past on the other side before any real flying poison could hit him, and he stabbed the beak vaguely down near its neck, hoping that would give him some hint of its purpose.

The beak writhed in his hand and became an abrupt long, curved blade, with a hook at the end. Draco blinked. It looked like the sticks with loops at the end that he had seen some of his friends in France use for handling snakes.

As if it had decided it had nothing to lose, the snake writhed around again and lunged at his leg. Draco leaped up, tangled himself in the pole because he wasn't used to handling its weight--and that was the *only* reason--and dropped onto the ground. He heard the splash of muddy water as his trousers trailed in it, and frowned at the thought of the cleaning he would have to do later.

The snake hissed in triumph and wrapped around his leg. It lowered its head teasingly, unblinking eyes fixed on him. It seemed to take pleasure in Draco's involuntary flinch as its fangs almost brushed the cloth of his trousers.

But because of its own sadism, it wasn't paying enough attention to the loop, which Draco got neatly around its neck in the next second.

The snake did go still for a moment, golden eyes fixed on Draco as though stunned that he had come this far. Draco twisted himself away while he still could. He thought the snake would probably do something to poison him in the next moment, and so he planted his feet and cast a few charms that could come in useful.

Then the snake began to fling itself about, and the Sticking Charms Draco had used to hold his feet in place and the Cushioning Charms he'd cast on the walls turned out not to be enough, after all.

Draco felt his head collide with the nearest stone, and grunted in pain. The snake was hissing like a child screaming, filling Draco's ears with shrill sound.

*Don't let it bite you.* That was the most important thing, and while the pole with the loop was important in controlling the snake, Draco didn't think it was important to *dissolving* the snake, the way the bridle had been important to dissolving the horse. He let the pole go and sprang up to clutch at a stone projecting out from the wall.

The snake's blunt nose slammed into the wall just beneath his boots. Draco grimaced and shook his head. He didn't like this, but since when did survival depend on whether he liked something or not?

He swung himself around, cast a Lightening Charm on his feet so he could more easily pull his body up the wall, and found some more projecting stones. Soon he was wavering on his stomach and shins over the frantically hissing snake, who had tried to climb after him but couldn't seem to find enough dry rock to support its bulk.

Draco met its eyes, and shivered a little. He didn't know how smart the magical creatures that the chain ritual had created really were, and he didn't think it mattered. He was looking at a beast that would never forgive him.

"Not that I need you to forgive me," he said aloud. "I know that you're going to break apart into pieces soon."

The snake's tongue flickered out again, and it turned its neck back and forth as though a path up the wall would mysteriously appear right where it needed it. Draco waited a second to make sure it wouldn't—stranger things had happened in the places Potter's magic had built—and then he levered himself into a sitting position and arranged his wand in front of him.

He knew the spell he needed to cast, the only one that would save him, but he'd never been good at it. That *might* have had something to do with watching one of his former lovers miscast it and spend four nights and days bubbling in hospital.

Then he grinned. He was *afraid* of something like that? Since when?

The snake had located a patch of stone that seemed soft and crumbling. It edged forwards, digging its fangs in as a hold. Draco winced as he watched the stone begin to smoke and sizzle beneath the poison dripping from its open mouth.

"Right," he said aloud, and touched his wand to his forehead. "*Aconitum.*"

The spell passed through him, leaving a strong, savage taste in his mouth and his tongue and even his bones. Draco grimaced and shook his head, resisting the temptation to spit. That would just waste time right now.

He crouched in place, waited until the snake was focused on him, and then dropped from his temporary perch right back onto the floor of the tunnel.

The snake immediately lunged for him, mouth open. Draco stood there and let it come. Its fangs sank into his calf, cutting through the cloth of his robes. He heard himself curse, he felt the burn as the venom began its climb—

And then he felt the almost equal burn as the venom halted and retreated down his leg, baffled by the spell that he'd cast to protect himself against poison. He met the snake's eyes and smiled, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the snake part its jaws and lean back as though it was astonished.

Then Draco kicked the snake in the mouth.

It fell backwards, twitching and flailing with its tail as though he had cut its head off. Draco laughed aloud and picked up the stick with the loop on the end, dropping it around the snake's neck as he had before. The snake tried to stir and strike at him, but the loop was too firmly fastened in place this time, and it couldn't.

Draco rode the twistings and thrashings, and laid his wand against a crack in the scales. This time, he reversed the spell that had protected him from the poison, light-headed with relief and joy. If he could cast the spell forwards in the right way, then there was nothing to keep him from reversing it and using the power backwards, too. "*Finite aconitum.*"

The crack between the snake's scales glowed as though light was shining from inside it. Then the serpent began to hiss, so agonized that Draco stepped back and winced. He had mastered the spell backwards and forwards now, but it wasn't the triumph he had expected. He was as reluctant to destroy the snake in the end as he had been to destroy the horse and the eagle. Like them, it was beautiful.

But then he thought of the passion in Potter's eyes, and had to shake his head. If he had to choose which one was more glorious and which one he wanted to resurrect more, then there was really no contest.

The poison finished flowing into the serpent, and it lay still on the ground. Draco kept it pinned by the stick with the loop, though. He didn't trust it to be dead until it turned back into the component object and whatever he would need to conquer the next animal in the ritual.

"Malfoy."

Draco started, but still didn't turn from the serpent. It could be more dangerous to him than Potter at the moment. It was closer.

And it probably didn't have the scruples against killing people that Draco realized he was depending on Potter to have, either.

"Haven't you interfered in my life enough?" Potter's voice had gone deep, and although he was attempting to keep it level, Draco could hear cracks in it, as deadly in their way as the crack between the snake's scales that Draco had filled with venom. "I tried to keep you out of it, and you made a promise to me that you betrayed."

"I never intended to keep that promise," Draco said, still watching the snake. The last shudders were running out. He thought now that it might be dead, and he might be able to press forwards and claim what he needed from it. But no reason to hurry if he didn't have to. Potter wanted to talk for right now, not fight. "Your own prejudices should have told you never to trust a bargain made with a Slytherin. What did your friends say about the stupid bargain you made with the magic?"

Potter was silent for so long that Draco wanted to turn and look at him. But meanwhile, the snake had swirled and crumbled into a shallow drift of scarlet dust, in the center of which was a single autumn leaf and a long white fang. Draco picked up the fang and nodded at the weight and heft of

it in his hand. He was careful not to nick his finger on the end.

“You can’t do this,” Potter said, in the voice of someone who had come to a decision. Draco turned to look at him. Potter stood with his head bowed, his hair blowing around him in a slight breeze coming through the tunnel entrance that Draco hadn’t noticed before. He lifted his face as Draco watched, and focused on him, shaking his head a little. “I worked too hard to do this.”

Draco sneered a little, because he thought he had the right. “How long did it take you to read the book that you got the ritual from? A single book, you implied to me, not extensive research. And you chose the objects and made them into animals, but that would have happened in the same moment that you sacrificed your heart for them. So don’t talk to me about *effort*. I think I’ve done more in attempting to free your heart than you did in protecting it.”

“You *can’t* do this,” Potter said, and took a single step towards him. Draco somehow felt that step should have cracked stone, made the water tremble. It didn’t, of course, but Draco did have to control the impulse to back up. “Yes, I talked about effort, but I was babbling. I should have remembered that I always had the power to stop you. I didn’t exercise it before.”

“Because your emotions weren’t free enough to see me as a threat,” Draco said, and nodded wisely. His heart was beating in a mad pattern, but so what? It wasn’t as though he intended to give in and let his fear dictate his actions.

“No,” Potter said. “Because I had some block in my mind about hurting you. But why should I? When you clearly don’t give a *fuck*—” he barked the word, and then dropped his voice back to a normal level for the next ones, which was scarier “—about what I want, or what I care about. So I might as well fight you with all the power at my disposal.”

Draco fell back a step against the wall, and lifted a hand in front of his eyes, cowering. Potter didn’t attack him, but Draco heard him take a deep breath. Peering between his spread fingers, Draco saw him standing with his eyes closed. Probably getting up the courage to attack a fearful enemy, Draco judged.

Draco cast a spell that weakened Potter’s legs beneath him and made him slide to the floor.

Potter roared in rage and lunged at Draco, but he didn’t get far, instead splashing down on his face in the muddy brown water. Draco wagged a finger at him.

“Let that be a *lesson*,” he said. “In thinking that you can bully and lecture your enemies instead of just attacking them. Bullying and lecturing is for villains, and you’ll never fill that role no matter how much you want to.”

Then he ran like hell down the tunnel.



## The Golden Battle

Draco hadn't tried to Apparate because he had felt the wards that Potter had raised around the tunnel the minute he Apparated in. But now he was racing through the stone, heading further and further away from the point where Potter had appeared, and he knew that he would need to change matters fairly soon.

That didn't seem to matter. Little lightning flashes of brilliance leaped and danced behind his eyes when he closed them, and his panting breath came out as gasps of laughter. He was doing well. He was doing *brilliantly*. He didn't understand how he had lived the last five years while being deprived of Potter's company.

He spun around a corner and reached a blank wall, with only a tiny crack high up where the stream of brown water ran from. Draco paused, fingering his wand in silence. He could try to blast an opening through, but he had no idea how much water had built up behind the wall. He could also try Apparating. He thought the spells might be weak enough here.

"Malfoy."

Draco turned around with a smile that was welcoming in spite of himself, and in spite of all the reasons that he knew it had not to be. Now he knew why he hadn't run faster, run longer, or tried to Apparate the minute he felt the spells weakening. He had a death wish, or else a wish to be closer to Potter for longer.

He bowed to Potter, who had come up behind him and stood watching him with those savage green eyes that shone even more radiantly than the snake's golden ones in the darkness of the tunnel. "Are you ready for the duel?" he asked.

"I don't want to duel you, because I would kill you." Potter's voice was clipped and cold, and he leveled his wand at Draco in a tiresome fashion. "Why don't you *leave*, Malfoy? Give me the fang and go. I wouldn't want to chase you further if you would leave me *alone*."

"How disappointing," Draco said, his blood leaping in his veins. His eyes saw a faint blaze of future motion around Potter's limbs. He felt in this moment as though he knew how every blow of the duel might go, like knowing the moves of a chess game twenty minutes in advance. "I've caused you so much harm, so much frustration, and you would be willing to let me go, as if none of that had ever happened?"

"You don't understand me," Potter said, and took a step forwards. "I *don't care about you anymore*. I never did."

"Beating me up on the Quidditch pitch and the looks of loathing that you gave me in school suggest otherwise," Draco muttered.

"That was when I was a *kid*," Potter said, biting the words off as though being a child had nothing to do with being an adult. "I've come a long way since then, and I've learned what's important."

"Saving the world?" Draco inquired sympathetically, taking a step back and keeping his eyes on Potter all the while. Potter didn't realize it, he couldn't have or he would have stopped, but he had

begun to circle to the right, the way that someone would in the process of a duel. Draco retreated in the opposite direction, and hoped that his manic grin of encouragement could be understood as something else, so that Potter wouldn't leave before he could begin the strikes of his spells. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," Potter said. "You have no idea how bad the rumors of the Dark Lords were getting, Malfoy." His face was flushed, and he gestured with one hand off to the left. Draco watched it, and thought how he would never be doing that if Draco hadn't disrupted his stupid chain ritual and brought the *real* Harry Potter back. "People were terrified and suspicious and about to have another war on the strength of their suspicions."

Draco shook his head. "That's not what your friends said, is it?"

Potter started, hard enough that the gesturing hand fell back to his side and he gaped at Draco. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Draco said, "that your friends had a conversation with you. It wasn't enough to keep you from coming here, but it was long enough to let me battle and almost destroy the snake. They didn't agree with you, did they? They didn't think the rumors were bad enough to have you sacrifice your heart and conscience to keep the wizarding world safe."

Potter snarled at Draco like a wild animal, with saliva dripping from his jaws. Draco smiled back. Yes, this was the real Potter, and just knowing that he existed in the world again made a deep, coiled satisfaction settle at the base of Draco's spine.

"Have you ever thought," Draco whispered, "that the rumors were exaggerated in your eyes because you've fought one Dark Lord and kept the world safe from him? And that was a noble thing, and a thing I thank you for."

"Only because it affected *you*." Potter was twitching like a horse expecting the whip, never taking his eyes off Draco.

Draco laughed a little. "Of course that's it. But I was a slave, and my father was a slave, and we're free now. But have you overestimated from there how bad it is when someone starts talking about becoming a Dark Lord? How do you know there weren't these kinds of threats before you did this little ritual? Voldemort wasn't the only Dark Lord that appeared in the last fifty years, after all. There was Grindelwald, too. Somehow, the Ministry survived what came after him, despite the fact that other people must have wanted to imitate him, too, and probably set up rituals to gain power."

Potter's grasp had tightened on his wand until it looked as though he would snap it in two. Draco hoped not. Then Potter would probably be left using the Elder Wand, and Draco didn't want to face *that* in battle.

"You're ridiculous," Potter whispered at last, in a tension that dragged sweet lines across the space between them. "You don't know anything about the last five years and how bad they've been in Britain, because you *weren't here*."

"I know that your friends had something to say to you about it," Draco said quietly. He didn't need to speak loudly now. Potter was attending to his every word as if it were a flung curse, that much was obvious. "What did they say?"

"It's none of your business," Potter said, his voice gone flat and without emphasis this time. "You

said before that you only cared about my killing Voldemort because it affected you. Well, this doesn't. Why not back out of my business and leave me to do what I think is necessary to protect the wizarding world?"

"Because you're my business," Draco said, and smiled at the baffled look on Potter's face. That only made it all the sweeter, really. The arrogant boy Draco had once thought Potter would have accepted that of *course* he was the center of everyone's universe, and Draco should be concerned with him. But Potter wasn't really like that, Draco knew now, and that made it all the more wonderful to mess with him and make him think about what he was doing. "And you're your friends' business. Why didn't you ask them about whether you should perform the chain ritual before you did it? I might not have anything to do with you, but they do. What did they say to you?"

"Shut *up*," Potter snarled, and cast a Stunner at him that Draco spun neatly aside from. Those dancing lessons in Paris hadn't come for nothing.

"What did they say to you?" Draco asked, catching himself with his hands on the back wall of the tunnel and standing there with a smile at Potter. He could feel his blood leaping again, and there was a faint, high, clear singing in the back of his mind, like someone running a finger around the rim of a wineglass. He knew what was going to happen next, and he knew how to move, and he doubted that Potter knew the same things. All of that contributed about equally to his joy. "What did they say to make you realize that they *are* part of your life, and you'd ignored them? What did they say to make you see—"

This time, Potter pulled off a nonverbal Disarming Charm, but Draco spun to the side, on one heel, and seized his wand as it flew past him. He wagged it at Potter and clucked his tongue. "How *naughty* of you, Potter. To not want to listen to someone who's reminding you of the people who are the most important to you. As though I wanted to walk away and leave you to the tender mercies of your friends *anyway*, but if I'm going to, then I at least want to be reassured that you'll listen to them. Will you?"

"Shut up." Potter whispered the words as fervently as a prayer, moving forwards. "If you could know—if you had the slightest *idea* of the reasons I did this—but you don't know anything about sacrifice."

Draco met his eyes and dropped the mocking smile he had worn so far, answering earnestly because he thought Potter deserved that. "I had the Dark Lord living in my house, Potter, and my mother telling me daily that she might die, or I might die, or my father might die. And what to do if any of those things happened." Then he paused and reconsidered. "Well, not if *I* died, of course. Then she focused more on what they would do, she and my father. As she should. The *point* is, I never had to make as many sacrifices as you did, but I knew I'd have to make them, and I was prepared to make them. And I learned something about sacrifice that seems to have escaped you."

"God," Potter said. His wand, which had been dangling at his side, started to rise to the side of his face again. "Do you *never* stop talking?"

"I learned that sacrifices are things you shouldn't make unless there's no way of avoiding them," Draco went on, gazing earnestly into Potter's face, which seemed fixed in a permanent snarl. "Not things that you rush into with a lover's embrace. You don't understand because you grew up with them and thought they were normal. But they aren't. They're *dumb*. You should have thought about other choices. But you didn't."

Potter tried to crack the stone apart at his feet and drop Draco into a pit, but he had hesitated too long, and given Draco time to cast charms on his own feet. That meant Draco was running up the side of the tunnel already, towards the roof, his body turning tightly sideways like a spider's to avoid the spell. Potter roared again.

Draco hung upside-down, with his arms folded, and considered him from that angle. "Well, at least you're living up to *one* stereotype of Gryffindors, and sounding like a lion," he told him. He thought Potter might appreciate that.

From the Blasting Curse that nearly hit Draco's temple in the next instant, Potter didn't appreciate that, at all. Draco shook his head, sighed, said aloud, "All geniuses are unappreciated in their own time," and flipped over, using a nonverbal *Finite* to break his feet's hold on the tunnel roof. The next curse went over his head, and Draco rolled forwards over the rough stone and the dirty water, nearly to Potter's feet.

Potter tried to angle his wand down at Draco, and his mouth opened for what would doubtless be a fruitless shout. Draco was tired of listening to him, really, and that gave him an idea for his next tactic. His wand flicked, and Potter's voice vanished under the pressure of his *Silencio*.

Potter had already shone that he could do nonverbal magic, so that didn't keep him from being dangerous. But Draco, scrambling to his feet and surveying his work with some complacency, thought it was an improvement.

Potter didn't even stop or slow down to try and fix his condition. He lunged at Draco, with what would have been a deep sound of passion if his voice had been working. His arms were spread wide, as though to catch Draco if he should try to dodge to the sides.

Draco had no intention of running away, especially when he was winning. He gave Potter a sweet smile and stepped forwards, so that Potter's braced body touched him, but didn't get knocked over the way Potter had doubtless expected. Potter flinched, as though the touch of Draco's skin to his was a branding iron.

And Draco positioned his head the right way with the help of one hand buried in Potter's thick hair, and kissed him.

Potter didn't like that at *all*.

He wrenched his head to the side and spluttered, so that it would have made kissing him more unpleasant than Draco was willing to put up with. But Draco stepped back, and bowed to him, and flipped aside when Potter aimed another curse at him.

"You're *mental*," Potter shouted at him, having finally fixed his voice. He was charging up the tunnel after him, wand busily trying to create nets around him that Draco couldn't cut his way through.

Draco had had better training in the Severing Charm than Potter evidently gave him credit for, though, and sliced through every web, while rolling his eyes at the loud exclamations from behind him. "If you really thought that, you would be trying to capture me and take me to St. Mungo's, not shooting random curses at me. You can't tarnish Gryffindor honor by shooting curses at the poor mental idiot, can you?"

"I'm trying to *stop* you." Potter dropped to one knee and aimed his wand at the stone behind

Draco. He opened his mouth to chant.

Draco flicked out a hex that gave Potter the sensation of being kicked in the jaw. Potter spat as if he thought he would have to spit teeth, and then turned and glared at him, his hand coming up to his mouth.

“You shouldn’t use spells that take a long time,” Draco told him seriously. “That just gives me the chance to interfere.”

Potter spun to face the wall again, and his voice rang out, persistent, commanding. Spiderwebs of cracks began to race up through the stone, aiming for the ceiling, and Draco clucked his tongue and leaped back towards him, casting the Stabilizing Charms that he had learned from Louis when it was time to repair his house’s foundation.

“You can’t just use spells that will collapse the tunnel on top of yourself, either,” he explained. “Potter, learn some self-preservation.” He cocked his head and then said, “And I should remember who I’m speaking to, right?”

Potter stared at him in silence, his hair hanging over his face. Draco would have felt sorry for him if he hadn’t seen the way that Potter reacted to pity. So he remained, quiet, intelligent, poised, waiting, and letting his helpful face absorb the thick stare Potter was giving him.

“Why did you kiss me?” Potter whispered.

Draco smiled at him. “Finally, a sensible question.” He hurried on when he saw the scowl descending to darken Potter’s face, because there was every chance that he wouldn’t remain sensible for long, and Draco shouldn’t waste the time that he *did* have with him. “Because I wanted to. Because the fire that’s coming back to you is a beautiful thing. I wasn’t attracted to you when I first saw you in the Ministry and you were being—stupid, but I was a little while later, when I realized how brilliant you were as the fire came back to life in you.”

“What is that fire and your perceptions of beauty next to the chance to keep the wizarding world safe?”

Potter paused after the question and stared at him. That was the only thing that allowed Draco to clear his throat politely. “That was supposed to be a serious question, right?” he asked, just to check.

Potter showed his teeth.

Draco lifted his hands placatingly. “Right, right. Okay. But yes, I think that fire is worth more than protecting the world. Because you *can’t* protect the world, Potter. You made it secure against Dark Lords, assuming I believe you when you say the rumors were declining after you performed your ritual. Not that you would know, would you, because you weren’t paying enough attention to rub two brain cells together.”

Potter opened his mouth, but Draco went on. “But you didn’t protect the wizarding world against Dark wizards, or the Ministry, or the Unspeakables going mad with artifacts. You can’t protect it against *human stupidity*, which ultimately is what gives Dark Lords their power. No one tortured the Death Eaters into following the Dark Lord during the first war. No one even tortured *me* at first. That came later.” He swallowed, a bit noisily. “But the point is, you can’t hold the world safe against all threats.”

“I wasn’t trying to do that.” Still kneeling, Potter beat his fist against his knee. “Just against the threat that’s my responsibility.”

Draco felt himself rise to attention on his toes. As for Potter, he turned red, looking as though he wished he had said something else.

“Your *responsibility*,” Draco repeated delicately. “Ah, I see it now. I *know* what I’m dealing with.”

“Your stupidity?”

“Your contributions are distracting and not appreciated, Potter.” Draco held up his hand a little and shook his head. “No. We’re dealing with Gryffindor guilt, the unreasoning, irrational guilt that makes you want to sacrifice yourself in the first place. Defeating the Dark Lord was arguably your fate. You couldn’t escape, and someone had to do it, so you did it. But what does defeating future Dark Lords have to do with what you did the first time around? Why should you, and you alone, be the one to keep the world safe from future ones?”

“Because no one else will.”

“I bet that’s not what your friends think,” Draco said, and wagged his head wisely. “I bet they would have been happy to help you, if you asked. I bet they would suggest that other Aurors could help, too, and the Ministry could do something other than sit around with its thumb up its arse. Granger would say that. I can almost *hear* her saying that.”

“Will you *stop* harping on my friends?” Potter rose to his feet with a glare hot enough to melt steel. “You’re *not* helping.”

Draco blinked at Potter. “I don’t mean to help with your sacrifice and your guilt. Quite the opposite, if anything. If you haven’t grasped *that* by now...” He shook his head, a bit lost for words.

“You need to stop talking about my friends,” Potter said, though in such a low voice that Draco could pretend he was talking to himself if he wanted. He thought he might do so. “You need to stop thinking that they think the way you do.”

Draco smiled. “What did they say to you?”

Potter flew at him, quickly enough that Draco actually was unprepared. But it wasn’t like he would let Potter *see* that. He coiled his legs beneath him and sprang towards the other side of the tunnel—

Straight into a net Potter had been weaving that he hadn’t noticed. It seemed that Potter hadn’t wasted all that time he was kneeling down after all.

As Draco hung there, splayed and helpless, Potter approached him and reached for the snake’s fang that Draco still clutched in one hand. He was panting, and his face was flushed while he stood there, breathless and triumphant. Draco had seldom seen him so beautiful.

“Thanks for this,” Potter said sweetly, turning Draco’s wrist so that he had to give up the fang or have his hand wrenched. Draco never chose pain when he could avoid it, so he let the fang go.

But since Potter *was* there, and so beautiful, and not paying attention to the way Draco’s head was

moving...

Draco leaned forwards and kissed him again, and sod what Potter would do to him in return.

## The Pale Web

Potter's lips were open and wet and warm against Draco's. Draco curled his tongue into motion, licking at Potter, knowing that Potter's mouth was only open because he was shouting in shock and had nothing to do with how talented Draco was at kissing, but also knowing that that didn't diminish how brilliant the kiss was.

Because it *was* brilliant. Draco had shared more tender kisses with his other lovers, and more passionate ones, too, but none that were as warm, as charged, flickering with the potential for more. Like the way a storm-charged sky flickered with the lightning, and the potential for thunder to come, Draco thought hazily. If he'd been able to bring his hands up and away from that bloody web, he would have clutched at Potter's head and showed him more of what a kiss from Draco could do.

It was shock, too, that kept Potter as still as long as he was. Draco knew it. It didn't stop him from sampling Potter's mouth, again and again, sucking at his lips, moaning a little in delight at the way his tongue tasted.

Then Potter yanked his head away, and leaped aside, and stood there with one hand raised as if he would beat his own face in, staring at Draco.

Draco licked his lips, slowly, taking his time. He let Potter see him doing it. He met Potter's gaze, and his smile deepened, and he inclined his head a little as he hummed, "Mmm. Has anyone ever told you that you're delicious?"

Potter shut his eyes. He stood there, still. Draco watched him. He was vaguely surprised that Potter hadn't come over to beat *his* face in, or at least that Potter hadn't started screaming curses or flinging hexes. That must be one powerful burst of shock to last that long.

Then Potter's glazed eyes slid open, and Draco caught his breath. It wasn't shock that had overcome Potter. It was passion.

*How long since he was kissed like that? And even though this chain ritual only seems to have affected him for a couple of weeks, that might be long enough for him to forget what some intense emotions felt like.*

Potter stared at Draco for one second more and turned his head away. His face was bright, rosy pink. One hand lifted to his mouth, and he wiped his lips and then spat theatrically on the floor of the tunnel.

Too late. Draco smiled, while his heart thrummed into overdrive the way it had when he was actually kissing Potter. He had seen what he had seen, and pursuing a reluctant lover had always been one of his favorite activities.

"I saw what you felt," he whispered, and while he had tried his best to make his voice less taunting, he didn't succeed. "I *know* what you felt. It felt good, didn't it? Warm. Striking to the center of you, and making you realize that you've missed experiences like that, and all of your self-centered smugness about saving the world can't compare to—"



*That* finally got Potter to shoot back across the tunnel, and drive his wand into Draco's throat. Draco broke off and widened his eyes, although he didn't try to shake his head, not with Potter's wand pressing into cartilage and tendons.

"You don't have a clue what you're talking about, Malfoy." Potter's voice was thick and hoarse, familiar, although Draco had to concentrate to remember where he'd last heard it. At Hogwarts, when Potter was so often angry at him that it was difficult for him to speak. Draco didn't bother to hide the smile that flooded across his face, because he didn't think Potter would kill him for smiling. "I have a good—I have a good *life*. I have lovers you know nothing about."

"And none of them wondered why you stopped firecalling them for a fortnight?" Draco clucked his tongue. "You might have had good lovers, but they couldn't have been recent."

Potter shut his eyes. He was shaking, but to Draco's disappointment, it didn't seem likely that the vibrations in his wand and limbs would build up to the point where he would start shaking the web and Draco could break free. "I'll thank you to leave them alone," he whispered. "They don't bother you."

"Well, no," Draco conceded, after considering this for a moment. "But they aren't taking care of you, either, the way they should. Otherwise, you would have been disgusted or at least familiar with my kiss. But you haven't had a lot of passion in your life lately, have you?"

"You're disgusting," Potter whispered back, with the force behind his words that Draco would have expected to hear from him in the beginning. "*Disgusting*. You can say what you like about me, but don't—don't say anything about other people."

Draco leaned his chin on a strand of the web that ran right below his face and smiled at Potter. "I doubt you mean that. Whenever I tell you that you're stupid for doing this chain ritual, which is no more than truth, you get upset. I think that you're going to get upset no matter what I say."

Potter cursed him, comprehensively, although not the kind that would make him break out in boils, and then reached up and touched his wand to certain key strands of the web. They broke, and Draco sagged towards the ground. Potter scooped him up with another wave of his wand that knotted some of the strands around Draco like a cocoon, and then turned. Draco bobbed at his shoulder like an apple in water as Potter strode towards what was presumably the entrance of the tunnel.

"You could drop the anti-Apparition wards now," Draco offered. "Since you have me captured."

"I don't trust you not to get away," Potter retorted bluntly over his shoulder, and kept walking.

Draco closed his eyes, basking a little in what Potter had said, even though he was stuck tight—literally—in the web, and he wasn't sure how he was going to get out again. It was so nice to be *respected*.

\*

When Potter finally Apparated them, Draco didn't expect to recognize the destination, and he didn't. Potter took him to a clearing in the middle of a forest where the trees loomed high and large around him. Draco thought they were hemlocks. He could think of all sorts of appropriate reasons for them, but he stifled his laughter, because he didn't think Potter would like him to start snickering helplessly.

Potter turned to face him, his hands planted on his hips, shaking his head. "What am I going to do with you?"

"You could let me go, give me back the fang, and let me kiss you again," Draco suggested helpfully.

To his surprise, there was an absolute *tumult* of red color up Potter's cheeks, and he turned his head away and coughed. "Besides that, I meant, Malfoy," he said, and his voice had gone interestingly strangled.

Draco sat up as much as he could in the web. "So you thought about it too! Damn, I'm an even better kisser than I thought I was."

Potter narrowed his eyes and tightened the web around Draco with a few sharp jerks of his wrists. Draco lounged back as much as he could in the web that wrapped him and widened his eyes at Potter. He thought the world needed some balance, so dark and forbidding were the snake-like slits of Potter's eyes.

"You have no idea what I could do to you, if I wanted," Potter whispered, and for a second, his hand shook on his wand. "The spells I know, that I was taught because I'm an Auror. And now there's no one around to scold me about prisoners' rights. I can use *any* of them, and what exactly are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Draco said peacefully. "I doubt I could do a lot if you really wanted to kill me, that's true. But have you considered that keeping me prisoner isn't a viable option, either?"

Potter sneered. "Why not? No one knows I have you."

"My parents would start looking for me, if I'm gone for too long," Draco said, settling his shoulders back into the web and shrugging a little. Of course, it was too strong to be broken that way, but any little bit that could weaken it might help. "And your friends know that I'm involved in doing something to you now, too. They would ask you about me if I went missing, and you wouldn't be able to lie to them."

Potter shook his head, once, twice, quickly, as though that would force Draco to make more sense. "You can't do anything as long as I keep you here," he said. He sounded as though he and not Draco was the one who had a web wrapped around his throat. "Your interference has *no point*. I'll just wait until—"

He faltered, and Draco nodded and smiled at him. "Right," he said. "If I don't have much ability to escape from you and continue breaking the chain ritual, you also don't have much reason to hold me. The chain ritual isn't whole anymore. You can't leave me and create a new one without breaking down the components that still remain. That might return you to your former state of mind because all your emotions would come pouring free. If you just stay here and wait, then you won't care about those things anymore, and you're likely to let me go because I ask you to, the way you showed me where the golden bird was because I asked you to."

Potter was breathing as heavily as a dragon getting ready to snort fire. "I can't believe how *unscrupulous* you are, Malfoy," he whispered, as though that was something to regret.

Draco grinned at him. "There's that, of course. But you don't have much more choice than I do."

We're caught in a game that's going to end in stalemate if you keep me here." He paused, and repeated more carefully, "If you keep me here."

"You think I'd be fool enough to let you go, now that I have you?" Potter stared at him. "I might be less passionate than you're used to, but I'm not stupid, Malfoy."

"Really," Draco said. "Because you thought this plan was a good idea, and you thought keeping the ritual secret from your friends was a good idea, and you thought the ritual was a good idea in the first place—"

"Shut *up!*" Potter shouted, stepping towards him. One of the trees leaning over the clearing caught fire from the sheer, outraged aura of his magic beating around him. Potter cast a spell to put it out, but never took his eyes from Draco's face. "Protecting the world is more important than whatever you're bleating on about."

"I'm bleating about getting you back to normal," Draco said. "And the problem is that this plan isn't a very good one for protecting the world. For all the reasons that I've already mentioned." Despite what he'd said, he didn't think Potter was stupid, just shortsighted, and that meant he should be able to remember what Draco had already told him, all the reasons he'd named, and that he shouldn't need to have them recited again.

Potter shut his eyes. "We'll need to wait a while," he whispered. "Then the ritual should change me back into what the world needs me to be."

"How do you know that the ritual is still working the way it's supposed to, now that you've partially emerged from the trance?" Draco asked, and worked his way back against the web. This time, it was because his shoulders hurt, and he gave a little grunt of discomfort when he couldn't get them into the right position.

Potter glanced up, sighed, and cast a spell that loosened some of the strands of the web. Draco nodded to him, and tried a smile that made Potter simply stare at him. After a moment, he turned away and continued speaking.

"The ritual is powerful. It should still work. We only have to wait until then, and I'll be back to what I need to be."

"What will prevent me from simply asking you to free me and give me the fang?" Draco asked, in continued interest and helpfulness. Really, Potter should have come to Draco if he wanted ideas about protecting the world. Draco could give him plenty of them.

"This," Potter said, and held up the fang, staring at him. He tapped it with his wand, and the fang Vanished. Draco winced in spite of himself.

"There," Potter went on, and he looked as stupid and virtuous as he ever had. "Now you can't continue breaking the ritual, and it won't matter what I might do to you in a few hours." He sat down on the grass and folded his arms.

Draco watched him, but said nothing. He was starting to think that he shouldn't be *so* helpful when it came to aiding Potter in defeating him.

He did wonder, though, why anyone would *want* to feel their emotion and intelligence draining away from them.

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Perhaps two hours had passed, and Potter had given Draco a sandwich when he complained of hunger, before Potter took in a deep breath and laid his hand against his forehead. Draco glanced up, wondering if he was going back to his emotionless mask.

Potter hunched forwards and stared at the grass. Draco snorted. Perhaps part of the enchantment returning was an obsession with simple things.

But Potter looked up and stared at him. “I don’t understand,” he whispered. “The ritual never mentioned anything like this.”

Draco cocked his head. “Like what?”

For a moment, Potter bit his lips, and Draco thought he regretted mentioning that much. But apparently the need to tell someone had overcome his reticence, because he muttered, “I don’t—I can *feel* someone getting ready to conduct a Dark Lord ritual. I can hear them talking about it. I don’t know who it is, but I know that they’re somewhere and getting ready to do it.” He swayed a little, before bringing his hands up and holding them against his forehead. “What—what is this?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” Draco said, considering him as he leaned further back into the web, and flexed the hand Potter had set free so he could eat his sandwich. Draco had suggested that Potter feed the sandwich to him instead, but Potter had backed away and turned so red that Draco had been forced to yield to hunger. “I don’t know enough about the ritual you described to me. But it would probably mean that your chain ritual is permanently weakened now. You can’t prevent the gossip and the ambitions any more. More than half the components are gone, right? You had eight or nine?”

“Eight,” Potter whispered, and then seemed to realize what he’d said, and stood up with his wand pointed at Draco. “I ought to *Oblivate* you, and then maybe you’re leave me alone,” he snarled.

Draco rolled his eyes. “We both know that that wouldn’t work any better than keeping me captive for a long time would. One of my friends would find out, and I would wonder why you were here.” He paused, looking at the tip of Potter’s wand that was aimed right at his eyes, and added, “Besides, you’re too good to do it.”

“I’ve done it to people before.” Potter waved his wand threateningly.

“I’m sure that it was to defend yourself or someone else,” Draco said, and smiled a little when Potter hesitated. “Of course it was. You have to remember, Potter, I know you.”

“You need to shut up,” Potter whispered, sounding fervent about it. “This—this isn’t what I planned on when I chose the ritual.”

Draco stared at him, waiting for him to add to that statement, since it made no sense as it stood. When he didn’t, Draco shook his head and completed it for him. “Of course you didn’t,” he said. “You thought it would *work*. But you should remember what I keep telling you. You had no way of knowing that you wouldn’t manage to hang onto your secrets. You told me right away. You would have told someone else, too. Someone who wanted to be a Dark Lord and thought you might know secrets, for example. There’s no—there’s no way that this ritual could have worked. And it’s breaking down now.”

Potter shivered. "All I wanted was to save the world," he whispered.

Draco would have liked to be compassionate about it, but he *had* to roll his eyes again. It was practically required of him. "That's too big a goal to do by yourself," he said. "You were too arrogant. Now you're paying the price."

Potter shut his eyes and turned his head away. Draco held his tongue, because if he didn't have any compassion for Potter, he wouldn't have started this crazy dance in the first place. It was too much work to try and help someone who didn't mean anything to him.

"Then the only way," Potter whispered suddenly, "is to end the rest of the ritual, and start over again once the rest of the components are gone."

Draco only had one time to blink before Potter whipped around, dissolved the web with a flick of his wand, and stepped forwards when Draco had barely stood up from his drop to the ground and began to wring his hands free of cramps.

"And since you made this necessary in the first place, with your stupid *interference*, you're going to help me," Potter snapped.

## The Quartz Wolf

“How are we going to defeat the next animal without the snake’s fang?” was the first question that Draco asked when Potter let him out of the web. He thought it was a sensible one.

Potter swung back on him and stared as though *Draco* was the stupid one. But Draco also thought events had proved that Potter had no room to criticize other people for lack of intelligence and foresight, so he simply wiped his hands off on his trousers and raised his eyebrows at him.

“The snake has two fangs, after all,” Potter said.

“I thought only one was left,” Draco said, trying to picture the pile of red ash that the snake had left behind when it disintegrated.

“You thought wrong,” Potter said, and turned away from Draco, extending one arm behind him. Draco thought he was pointing at the torn web, and not until Potter jerked his head at him and clicked his teeth did Draco divine that Potter wanted Draco to take his hand so they could Side-Along Apparate. Draco stepped up to him and clicked his teeth in return, though he made it a more elegant sound than Potter could have, of course.

“If you wanted me to touch you, all you had to do is ask,” he said.

As he’d hoped, the tone he used made Potter turn as red as an apple, but he only jerked his head again and vanished. Draco found himself holding his breath through the Apparition, which was ridiculous, but at least he had a head start when they appeared in the tunnel again and Draco found the smell from the brown water mounting up to his nostrils.

Potter seemed oblivious to the way Draco was pinching his nose. When he decided to do something, Draco thought, very little could stop or slow him down. He watched as Potter strode over to the pile of ash that had been the snake and rooted through it for a second. Then he stood up with a second ivory fang gleaming in his hand and nodded at Draco.

“Now we can do what we need to do,” he said, and held out his hand again.

Draco took it and opened his mouth to ask a question. But they Apparated again before he could do that, and appeared in a misty, dripping forest that made Draco blink twice before he was sure of what he was seeing.

All around them stood pine trees, and in between the pine trees threaded silvery mist, and here and there in the mist moved shapes. Dark shapes, Draco saw, staring at them, four-legged. They were beautiful, or so it looked, in the brief glimpses Draco had of them before they hid themselves away again. He wondered if they were guardians for the next piece of Potter’s heart, but then shook his head. None of the other places had needed guardians beyond the beast that they were meant to defeat. He didn’t think this one did either.

He started to ask Potter where they would find the beast, and what kind it was, but Potter held up a hand. His head was up, Draco saw, his eyes narrowed and traveling around the clearing they’d appeared in as though he didn’t recognize the place.

“Hush.”

Draco only heard Potter because he was already watching his mouth. Draco grimaced and stood still, glancing from side to side. The deep green and silver around him reminded him of some of the nicer Slytherin blankets he'd had on his bed in Hogwarts. Beautiful, but chill, too. Draco wished he could gather some of the loose wood that he saw lying on the forest floor and build a fire, but Potter would probably have a heart attack if he did.

“There,” Potter said at last, his voice still low but actually audible this time. “Hear that?”

Draco turned his head and squinted, but saw nothing save more crowding tree branches leading away into the distance like a tunnel. After a second, he heard what Potter must mean, a soft, low, melancholy wail that rose and then died away again. His spine prickled, and he wondered if they'd come to face an Augurey.

But Potter nodded, and said, “That's the sound of the wolf that's guarding the next piece of my heart.”

“A wolf?” Now that Draco thought about it, wolves were probably the four-legged creatures he'd seen in the mist. “That doesn't sound so bad.”

He flinched a little at the way Potter turned around and stared at him.

“*Really*,” Potter said flatly, and turned back to the woods again. “That's what you would think, Malfoy. It's really too bad that you ruined everything. Otherwise, you would have got this far and died, so I wouldn't have to worry about you anymore.”

He passed a minute more or so listening, then nodded and started splash-crunching forwards through the forest. “Come on. We need to reach the cave it guards.”

*Caves again*, Draco thought, and shook his head. “The golden bird came out of a cave, and the scarlet snake was in one,” he said aloud as he followed Potter. “This chain ritual doesn't have much imagination, does it?”

Potter's shoulders hunched. “You have no idea what it's like,” he whispered. “How powerful the spell is.”

“You could fight this wolf and be done with it,” Draco offered. He liked that, the thought of standing back and watching Potter battle an enemy that didn't have Draco so terrified for his own life he couldn't pay proper attention. He'd often regretted that he remembered so little of Potter's duel with the Dark Lord. “Since you know all the tricks. You'll have me on the side for admiration and applause if you need it.”

Potter gave a short, grim laugh. “I'm not sure that I can defeat the wolf, either,” he said, and crossed a bed of rustling pine needles that Draco made much less noise on, once he knew they were there. “Its duty is to guard the piece of my heart that remains to it. Not to let anyone through. That includes the person who cast the ritual.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Of *course* you would choose a ritual like that,” he muttered. “Of *course* you would.”

“You can be quiet and not alert the wolf that we're coming, or you can chatter and have it ready to

face us,” Potter snapped back at him.

Draco rolled his eyes at Potter’s back again, but didn’t say anything. Draco actually thought it was exceedingly *likely* that the wolf had already heard them. If Potter wanted him to keep quiet, he would, though.

It was rather like Potter to think this was important, after everything that had already changed and probably alerted the wolf. He mistook the symptoms for the disease. He thought that he could protect the world again by the sacrifice of his heart, that it was his duty and his responsibility, and if the first one didn’t work, the solution was to choose a better sacrifice, not change his tactics.

Draco kept his opinion on that to himself, because if he started now, he wouldn’t *stop*. He walked in silence, and when Potter slowed ahead of him and peered frowning into the distance, Draco jerked to a halt, too.

A growl came from the left, or at least Draco thought that was the direction. It was hard to tell with the eddies of mist still pouring around them. Draco turned in a slow circle, his hand on his wand.

“Don’t threaten him,” Potter breathed, into his ear. Draco kept himself from jumping, but it was difficult. He hadn’t heard Potter creep up on him, either.

“Don’t *threaten* him?” Draco whispered back. “When he already knows what we’re here for?”

Potter hesitated one more time, then shrugged again. “Well. I suppose you can’t help doing that.”

“Right,” Draco said, and just happened to be facing in the right direction when the mist parted and he saw their wolf.

It shone from the inside, its fur heavy and white and glinting, with light apparently trapped inside each hair. Draco’s breath caught inside his throat and stayed there. He thought he saw one reason why Potter had been convinced that it could get close to them and pounce on them before they saw it. Its fur was almost the exact pale color of the mists blowing around them. Draco nodded a little and held up his hand. Potter reached over his head and let his hand rest briefly in Draco’s.

He’d passed the fang to him. Draco held it low and close at his side, meeting the wolf’s silver-grey eyes, the color of the ones he looked at in the mirror when he was dressing up. And when he got up in the morning, to be fair. And when he got up in the middle of the night, just to make sure that he still existed.

He slid a step forwards, wondering if there was any way he could fling the fang like a dart at the wolf.

Then the wolf crouched down, teeth wrinkling back silently from ivory fangs of its own—

And vanished.

Draco spun round, gaping. He thought that the wolf must have Apparated for a second, and then told himself not to be stupid. Wolves couldn’t Apparate.

*Including wolves created as magical creatures by a chain ritual? Are you sure about that?* asked an unpleasant voice in the back of his head.



Draco held up the fang in front of him and turned to face Potter. “What can it do?” he demanded in a whisper. “Is this something else that the ritual added to it, the way the dog could breathe fire?”

“It walks from space to space,” Potter muttered, his own eyes darting around as though he expected to see the wolf appear out of a shadow. Maybe he did, Draco thought. It seemed as likely as anything else in this mad quest. “It’s always appearing where you least expect it—Malfoy, look out!”

He lurched forwards and into Draco, at the same moment as Draco felt teeth snap near his ankles. He whirled back, and the wolf was there, glowing from the inside, bright as hatred turned over. It crouched once more—it still hadn’t made any sound other than that original howl Draco had heard, and the sound of teeth meeting on empty air—and then it vanished again.

This time, Draco was looking directly at it without any mist to interfere, since the wolf had knocked the mist aside with the leap it had made, and it made a sound after all right before it went. It snarled, a low, hollow, ripping sound that seemed to grow out of the center of its chest. The snarl lingered on the air as it disappeared.

Simply gone. Draco had never seen an Apparition that neat either.

He turned in a slow circle, staring suspiciously at the shadows under trees. He remembered what Potter had said, that it would appear in the place he least expected. His mind darted, trying to expect all the places at once, to understand where it was and where it had gone.

If he suspected everything he could see, it would have to stay hidden, wouldn’t it?

Then Draco went down under its weight as the wolf appeared above him.

Draco gasped for breath, because the way it knocked him to the ground had knocked out his air, too, and reached up, sinking his fingers into the ruff of thick fur around its neck. He managed to hold it back from opening his throat with its teeth, but he couldn’t keep it at bay for long. It strained against his hold, closer and closer.

The fang Draco held rested right alongside its neck, close to piercing the skin, but the wolf ignored it with an ease that made Draco wince. It seemed that the fang wasn’t meant to be used as a weapon against the wolf.

*What should I do with it, then?*

Then Draco’s racing thoughts concentrated wonderfully, both because the wolf’s teeth were close enough for him to feel them scrape at his skin, and because Potter had cast a spell at the wolf from the side.

The conjured wind blew the beast off him and towards one of the looming trees that Draco could see better, now that the mist seemed to be dissipating. The wolf twisted back on itself in midair, curling around until Draco thought it was trying to assume a sleeping position, nose on its tail.

Then it vanished again.

Draco nodded at Potter and worked his way to his feet. “Let me guess,” he said, gasping and dazed and with his blood and his grin and his mind all working a thousand miles an hour. “It’s resistant to most of the spells that you could use on it, the way the bird and the dog were, so the only way is to

attack indirectly.”

“Got it in one, Malfoy.” Potter had stepped back a pace, too, and darted his head around from trunk to trunk, as though carving the air into slices with his gaze. “And he’s more resistant, because the closer you get to my heart, the stronger the guardians are.”

“I didn’t think that snake was much of a challenge.”

Potter sneered, but the wolf appeared again before he could say anything, right beside him, and lunged to hamstring him.

Draco shoved Potter out of the way, just as Potter had tried to shove *him* once before, and ended up in front of the wolf. It looked up at him, grey eyes trained on what Draco thought must be his jugular, and got ready to leap.

Draco couldn’t think of anything else to do, especially since he apparently wasn’t supposed to stab it, so he hit it over the head with the fang.

The wolf yelped, a long, sharp sound that vanished along with it as it leaped into nothingness. But not before Draco thought he caught a glimpse of a patch on top of its head where the fur had melted away.

Draco blinked at his hand, and at the fang, and then down at Potter, sprawled on the forest floor. “Suppose you tell me what this fang does,” he suggested.

“I don’t know,” Potter said briefly, standing up. “I didn’t know what form the creatures would assume before they did it. I didn’t know that tooth would turn into a bridle, or that you would need to take a bit of beak from the eagle, at least until it actually broke off and I seized it. The book wasn’t forthcoming about that. Probably for the reason that you told me. If I knew all about it, I could have betrayed those secrets along with the secret of the ritual itself to anyone who asked me.”

Draco sniffed. “Encouraging that you trust me now, discouraging that you still refer to it as betrayal,” he said, and turned in another slow circle, eyes lingering on every single tree trunk and leaf and bit of fog in the place.

“It *was*,” Potter said, and took an aggressive step towards Draco that Draco might have been delighted with if they hadn’t been where they were, in the middle of a forest trying to fight a dangerous and clever enemy. “If you had approached me openly and told me what you were doing from the beginning, then—”

“Then you would still have agreed to it, up until the moment when you regained enough of your senses to realize what you’d agreed to,” Draco interrupted, pausing to glare at him. “And then it would have been too late anyway, because we’d have unraveled enough of the chain ritual to have to go on unraveling it. But you wouldn’t have agreed to that, probably.”

Potter opened his mouth, at the same moment as the wolf appeared on Draco’s shoulders.

Draco went down under the weight before he could even think about fighting. The wolf was curling and snarling around him, like a feather pillow come ridiculously to life—and equipped with sharp nails, Draco thought, wincing as one hind foot raked him—and twisting as much as it could to avoid the fang.

Draco did manage to bang the stupid weapon against its hind leg, and again fur fell off. The wolf screamed, but this time, it didn't leap away. It got its teeth into the nape of Draco's neck and yanked.

Draco screamed in turn as he felt the flesh pulling off. The pain that flared up through his soul was nothing compared to the way that his anger did, though. He had been unwounded through all his adventures so far, and now this *wolf*—

This time Draco slammed the fang into its belly.

The wolf yelped, and snarled, and howled, and for a second, as he rolled over, Draco thought he'd shaken it off. But the wolf whirled back, its claws dug into him, and this time its teeth were in line for his throat.

As it launched itself forwards with a long, howling shriek, Draco began to realize that he might have underestimated how intense a confrontation with Potter's magical animals could get.

## Black Humor

“No!”

The voice came from the side, so sharp that Draco thought for a second it was an incantation. It distracted the wolf, at least, and it turned its head. Draco got his legs up and kneed the damn beast in the belly.

The wolf sprang off with a howl that came out sounding just on the edge of words, and whirled around to face Draco, its mouth open. Draco staggered up and put his back against a tree, banging the wolf with the fang before it could vanish again. Another ragged patch of fur fell off, this time along the side of its right flank.

Blink, and it was gone. Draco panted for a second before he turned to face Potter.

Potter stood with his wand out and aimed at the spot on the ground where Draco and the wolf had been wrestling. He was flushed, his mouth half-open and his eyes wide. Draco had to admit he found the vision intriguing, but he didn't know what was going on. Had Potter seen something that meant they couldn't kill the wolf?

“What?” he asked, as things just continued like that instead of resolving one way or the other, and Draco was getting bored.

Potter lowered his wand and swallowed, addressing the holly wood instead of Draco when he spoke. “I just realized that I don't really want to see him kill you,” he mumbled.

Draco blinked. Then he blinked again. Then he said, “That's flattering, Potter, really,” and scratched his back for a second. The wolf had torn open long runnels that still bled. Draco touched his wand to them and healed the wounds with the best *Episkey* he could muster, not taking his eyes off Potter. “You didn't think about this before? You would have been content to see me die if I was fighting the snake or the eagle?”

“Shut up,” Potter said, glaring at him. “You know that I wasn't myself then, and that means I couldn't—”

He clamped his mouth shut hard enough to rattle a few teeth, but it was too late. Draco had heard that particular admission, and he had no intention of letting it go. He smiled at Potter and repeated in a soft voice, “You weren't yourself. So you admit that the chain ritual changed you more than you thought, and you weren't really your own person when you were under its influence?”

“I'm still under its influence because part of it still exists, you berk,” Potter snarled, taking a step forwards. “So maybe this compassion for you is part of it! Did you ever think of *that*?”

“No,” Draco said simply. “Because you demonstrated compassion for me at least once before when you weren't under it, and I think saving people is part of your essential character.”

“What occasion was that?” Potter looked about a second away from putting his hands on his hips.

Draco held his eyes. “Don't Fiendfyre and the Room of Requirement mean anything to you?” he

asked.

Potter looked off to the side, chewing on his lip with teeth that suddenly seemed to have grown sharp enough to hurt him, and Draco smiled.

That, of course, was when the wolf appeared, on a tree branch above Potter, which cracked under its weight. However, the sound was damp and muffled, and Potter didn't appear to notice the animal plunging towards his head.

Draco spun his wand and Levitated the branch away from Potter, high enough into the air that he would defy even the wolf to jump off it and land on someone. Trust Potter not to be paying enough attention to his defense, even when the magical animals had shown that they were just as likely to attack him.

Of course, the wolf didn't stay on the branch and be trapped like a good little magical creature. It growled and vanished again.

Draco rolled his eyes. Then he paused, and looked from the fang in his hand to Potter's wand. He shook his head slightly. "The obvious way to defeat the wolf was staring me in the eye all the time, and I never noticed," he muttered.

"What? What are you talking about?" Potter demanded, leaning towards him.

Draco sighed. "You used a wind charm against it, and just now I used the Levitation Charm," he said. "It can't be attacked directly by magic, any more than I can stab it with this fang. But what happens if I use the wind to blow the fang against it?" He held up the fang and glanced around for a suitable tree.

"That might work," Potter allowed, blinking.

This time, the wolf appeared right between them, as if it wanted to have an equal chance of doing harm to them either way it turned. Draco threw up the fang into the air and hurled the wind against it and the wolf at the same time, pinning them to the trunk of the great grey giant behind Potter.

The wolf snarled and yipped, but only until the fang touched it. Then it cried out, and went on struggling as Draco adjusted his blasts of wind, moving the fang over its body. Wherever it touched, the fur came off the wolf.

Draco winced as he realized that the wolf was almost naked now, with the fang currently resting on top of its head so that curls of fur were peeling away around the ears, and still there was no sign of it dying. What would he have to do, stab it through the heart while it writhed beneath him like a plucked chicken?

But as soon as the last of the fur melted from around its ears, the wolf stiffened. For an instant, Draco saw the plucked chicken he had imagined. Then the wolf slumped to the ground, losing definition as it went, flesh melting like paint around the quartz stone at the center, which must have been the object that Potter formed it from.

Then the fur came flying from all over the clearing, and collected together into a shimmering blanket as Draco watched. The whirlwind stopped soon, and left the fur as a great gathered cloak glowing from the inside in the grass at Draco's feet. Draco picked it up, stroking the white softness where it draped around his arms, and blinked at Potter.

“Did you know that would happen?” he asked.

“Obviously not, or I would have told you to hit the wolf on the flank with the fang in the first place,” Potter said. He had a sharp frown carved between his brows as he watched Draco holding the fur blanket. Draco doubted it was because he really cared about the messy manner in which the wolf had died, and his next words proved that. “It seems an odd way for one of these creatures to go, and an odd gift to leave behind.”

Draco shrugged. “What? Do you think that was a false wolf, and another one is hiding around here somewhere? The real one?” He hoped not. His joints ached stiffly from fighting and being held in Potter’s web and swung around on the silver rope behind the eagle, and he wanted to go home and get a good night’s rest before Potter dragged him off somewhere else.

“No.” Potter glared at him. “I know that’s the real one, because of this.” He picked up the piece of quartz and stared at it for a second before slipping it into his pocket. “I’m just saying that it’s strange, that’s all.”

Draco snorted. “Fucking strange, yeah.” He draped the wolf-fur cloak around his shoulders. He would have shrunk it to fit into a pocket, but he wasn’t sure how much these magical weapons should be changed. “See you tomorrow.” He turned around to walk to a suitable Apparition point, which would mean a place where he wasn’t about to Splinch himself on a tree he didn’t see.

“Wait!”

Draco glanced back at him with a scowl. “What? Did you think of something else I need to do?”

Potter flinched a bit from the blast of Draco’s eyes, but shook his head. “I didn’t mean that. I meant—where are you going?”

“Home,” Draco said. “So I can sleep. I don’t know about superhuman Aurors like yourself, but regular humans need a bit of sleep.” He yawned, and touched his wand to his shoulders to send a Warming Charm flooding through the muscles to relax them. He was going to use the massaging capabilities of his bed once he was back in the Manor, that much was certain.

“You’re pretty superhuman yourself, to have done this much,” Potter muttered. Draco decided to let the compliment pass unnoticed. Potter was almost sure to retract it if he realized that Draco knew it was a compliment. “I just meant...can I come with you?”

Draco was sure he let his jaw fall. Potter turned his head away. “I don’t think I’d be welcome in the Burrow right now,” he mumbled.

“What *did* they say to you?” Draco demanded in fascination.

“Will you stop harping on that?” Potter’s eyelids had drawn down almost enough to hide his eyes, and he turned his head away further, so Draco could only see a telltale quiver of nostrils. “It’s nothing important.”

“Important enough to make you seek out the shelter of the Manor,” Draco said. He hesitated. He didn’t want to *discourage* Potter from coming with him and giving Draco the chance to talk him out of his idiocy, but he had to explore all the options or Potter would accuse him of not being fair later. “Don’t you have your own home?”

“It doesn’t feel welcoming, lately.” Potter reached out and slapped a trunk, only to withdraw his hand and wipe the moss that covered it off on his robe. “To be perfectly honest, that’s where the blue book is that I got the chain ritual out of. I think it’s better if I’m not around temptation right now.” He finally turned to face Draco, his hands locked behind his back as though he was preparing to recite a Potions recipe. “And I don’t want to be lonely.”

Draco smiled and reached out to take Potter’s arm, since it was his turn for a Side-Along Apparition now. “Then of course you can come with me, and the only hard thing will be explaining you to my parents.”

\*

“Draco, why is Harry Potter at our dining room table?”

His father did well, Draco thought, as he stood up to greet Lucius. He had taken one step through the door from the drawing room and stopped immediately, looking back and forth between Draco and Potter, but he had at least asked for an explanation this time, instead of drawing his wand and blasting away. Draco didn’t like to think about what had happened the one time he had *mentioned* bringing Louis home.

“Because I invited him, Father,” Draco said now, in the perfect schoolboy tone of respect that Narcissa had tried to encourage Draco to use for his father when he was at Hogwarts.

Lucius looked at Potter, who had frozen over his meal of bread and toasted cheese, the only thing he would accept from the Malfoy house-elves. Apparently he hadn’t thought Draco was serious when he said Potter would have to be explained to his parents, although Draco couldn’t tell *why*. It wasn’t like he had engaged in much lying to Potter over the last day. “Let me phrase this another way. Is there a reason why Potter is a guest instead of his head being measured for a position on the wall of the Pale Sitting Room?”

Draco rolled his eyes and scratched gently at the back of his neck, where the house-elves had applied a poultice to his wolf bite. “Don’t be ridiculous, Father. His hair would clash horribly with the color scheme in that room.”

Across his father’s face, a smile drifted like a cloud. “Ah. You are right.” He inclined his head to Draco a little and turned away. “I have words to speak to your mother,” he added over his shoulder.

“I’m sure you do,” Draco muttered, watching him go. At times like this, his parents would get together and condole over the many trials and tribulations their son brought on them. Draco knew because he used to eavesdrop. They never said anything new over many years, no matter what varied challenges he set himself to present them with. He wondered that they could still find the conversation stimulating.

“Malfoy, your father just walked out of here without hexing me.”

Draco turned and sat down in the chair next to Potter, taking a few bites of his own considerably more luxurious meal, which had colors other than white and yellow in it. “Is there something in you that wanted him to?” he demanded. “Honestly, am I the only representative in this house of a newer, more modern, less bloodthirsty world order?”

Potter did another series of blinks, and put his bread, hanging uselessly in his hand, down on the

plate. Draco eyed it, wondering whether he could get the elves to swap it out for something more nourishing. The state Potter was in at the moment, he might not notice. "It would have been normal," he said.

Draco had to lower his head so that raspberries and blueberries wouldn't go leaping away from his plate with the force of his snort. "When have you led a normal life? And when have you been around my parents since the war? What would you know about how they entertain a guest?"

Potter's eyes closed and his teeth clipped together as though he was considering a different kind of reply than the one he eventually made. "Your father doesn't seem to know how they treat them, either. Or did you forget to send the engraved invitation to me, and that's what's pissing him off?"

Draco shook his head. "I'm so much more forgiving and peaceful in outlook than most of the people I associate with," he murmured, swallowing another forkful of mixed fruit a moment later. "It must be spending all those years on the Continent. One gets used to civilization, you know, and the amenities that go along with it. Like wit, and the way that hereditary enemies will ignore each other for the sake of not acting like barbarians at breakfast."

"It's dinner."

Draco smiled in spite of himself. "Well done, Potter. You might not fit in as badly as I thought you would."

Potter picked up his bread again, dashing Draco's plans for the house-elves, and took another bite of the cheese sandwich as though it was his lone friend in a cold and hostile world. Then he burst out again, hard enough that some crumbs went skipping from his lips. "Why, Malfoy? Why bring me here?"

"Who asked to come, now?" Draco murmured, addressing his glass.

Potter was silent in the way that a volcano might be silent right before it exploded. Draco leaned forwards to take some more of the ham from the plate that the house-elves had left in the middle of the table. "You were the one who wanted to come," he said, when he decided that Potter had been silent for long enough. "It's true that perhaps this stay at my home isn't going to be all you thought it was, but you preferred it to your friends' house or your own."

Potter bowed his head and pushed his hands up his forehead into his hair, muttering something to himself that Draco graciously chose not to listen to. The muscles in Potter's shoulders were taut and trembling. He would have liked to destroy something, Draco thought, and he knew that Potter would have welcomed something breakable and unimportant to shatter even more.

"Listen," Draco said, when it became clear that Potter had retreated into silence again. "You made a stupid mistake. That doesn't mean that you have to go on making stupid mistakes for the rest of your life. But you have to get past this one, and you have to think about it and talk about it and—I don't know, do whatever else you think is necessary to help yourself out of this situation."

Potter jerked his hands down and stared at Draco for a second. Then he dropped his hands on the table, sat up, and said, "Fine. Then we're going to go upstairs, and you're going to tell me how *you* survived the last five years without making a stupid mistake."

Draco rolled his eyes around his mouthful, and swallowed before speaking. "Did I say I had? I've just got past them more gracefully than you have."



“Then tell me,” Potter insisted. “Tell me what you’ve been doing, where you’ve been, that makes you able to—the kind of person who can resist this.”

Draco raised his eyebrows and thought of all the many answers he might give to that.

But Potter had leaned forwards and was focused on him, bright and intent and *new*, and Draco had to admit that he would rather encourage this Potter to stick around than turn his back on him. He nodded back. “All right. Let me finish eating.”

Potter spent the rest of dinner watching every bite Draco lifted to his mouth as though it was the only thing standing between him and a normal life. Draco had to admit that he didn’t find the attention off-putting, even though he probably should.

*Quite the opposite.*

## The Red Room

The drawing room Draco chose to lead Potter to was one of the more comfortable ones in the Manor, he considered, and certainly the right thing for someone like Potter, who was hardly used to luxuries. The walls were red, a deep, dusky color that made them seem to be sitting in the middle of roses when the fire glowed, the way it did now. Here and there were portrait frames, but Draco noticed they were all empty as he and Potter took their chairs. He was pleased for his ancestors' courtesy, to leave Draco and Potter alone for what had to be a private conversation.

Or, well, maybe it wasn't exactly courtesy, Draco thought, remembering Potter's blood status. He didn't scowl because of a heavy effort, and managed to take his seat, and sip his drink, and smile at Potter.

"Are you sure that you don't want anything to drink?"

Potter nearly fell out of his chair, even though it was a large and heavy armchair and Draco didn't see how the arms would *let* him fall out. "Oh, no," he muttered. "I don't—I'm not a good judge of alcohol."

Draco laughed gently in spite of himself, feeling the drink burn warm in the center of his chest. "What you mean is that you never have anything stronger than butterbeer, and you don't think we have anything like that here."

Potter bit his lip. "Yes, fine," he said. "That *is* what I mean. But you don't have butterbeer, do you?" He flung that out as a challenge, and this time, when he leaned forwards from the chair, Draco was pleased to see that it was of his own free will.

"Niri, a butterbeer for our guest, if you will," Draco called, snapping his fingers, and a bottle of butterbeer—unopened so Potter wouldn't be paranoid—and a mug appeared on the table beside Potter.

Potter stared at Draco, who lifted his own glass to his lips, and sipped, and shrugged, and smiled, and said, "Having house-elves means never having to say you're out of anything."

After a long moment, Potter picked up the mug and opened the bottle with a twist of his hand that told Draco he was an expert, shaking his head. "It means never having to say that there's anything you can't get," he muttered. "It means never having to acknowledge your limits." He lifted his head and glared in a way Draco imagined was intended as a personal message to him.

Draco clucked his tongue, doing it a moment later than he should, for maximum irritation efficiency. "I don't understand why you dislike us so much if that's what you think about pure-bloods, Potter, I really don't."

"You don't understand what it might be like to grow up in the Muggle world and resent the people who were in the wizarding world all along?" Potter took a single sip of butterbeer and then flattened his hands on his knees and stared at Draco. Draco thought—at least, he flattered himself—that it didn't come from any distrust of the drink. Rather, Potter was too intrigued by Draco to focus on the butterbeer. "People who can have whatever they want at a snap of their fingers, and keep telling you that you won't belong no matter what, because you have the wrong *blood*?"

“I was referring more to the concept of having no limits,” Draco said gently. “Since there’s nothing you won’t sacrifice to keep your friends safe.”

Potter smiled like someone who’d smelled blood. “And the wizarding world. You might as well go ahead and say it. I can practically *hear* you wanting to shout at me how stupid it is.”

“Well,” Draco said, and gestured with an open, empty hand while he sipped his drink. “Now I don’t have to say it, since you said it for me.”

Potter hissed at him, enough like a genuine snake that Draco was glad he was sitting already. “I did what I wanted to do, Malfoy. Maybe I could have done it better, but someone has to keep more Dark Lords from rising.”

Draco put his chin on his fist and contemplated Potter. He looked like he was about a second from springing to his feet and pacing about the room. His eyes were so hectic, so vivid, that Draco licked his lips without quite meaning to. Potter narrowed his eyes.

“Say what you’re thinking,” he ordered.

Draco answered at once, wondering if Potter knew how dangerous he could be if he ever decided to compel obedience instead of asking for it. “I’m thinking that someone has to do it, but why does that someone have to be you? You’ve done more than enough on the Dark Lord-fighting front for one lifetime.”

Potter shook his head. “But this ritual said that only someone who had already defeated a Dark Lord could do it.”

“And we’ve already established that the ritual was a stupid idea, and you’re stupid if you continue to think it wasn’t.” Draco crossed his legs elegantly and smiled as he held Potter’s gaze. “So why would your previous status matter in that case?”

“I can’t expect most people to understand how important this is.”

“I expect that most wizards would agree more Dark Lords are *not* desirable, in the general scheme of things,” Draco said dryly. “How many people did you actually try to explain it to?”

He sort of hoped that by leading up to it this way, he would get to hear about Potter’s conversation with his best friends, but Potter shook his head and shut his eyes. “Most people thought it was a problem that would pass on its own,” he muttered. “That people were inspired by Voldemort’s— example, and how far he got before he got stopped.”

“Before you stopped him,” Draco corrected. Despite the way Potter had emphasized his little deed when talking about the ritual and the book, Draco didn’t think he took it seriously enough, or thought about it that often.

Potter snapped his eyes open and looked hard at Draco. “But no one else thought about how to stop it, for good and all. They were just coping with each case as it arose, and not thinking about the connections between them.”

Draco balanced his glass on his stomach. “You intrigue me, Potter. I read about some of these problems when I was abroad, but never that they were all connected. What kind of grand

conspiracy did you discover?"

Potter's lips tightened, and his eyes darted away. "I didn't mean it that way," he said. "I just meant—you can't deal with it one case at a time. You have to find a way to stop it all, or who knows how many innocent people will die?"

"And who knows how many people trying to become Dark Lords will stop when they realize that they've drawn the attention of the Aurors, or when they see how much research they'll have to do for small scraps of power?" Draco asked, shaking his head when Potter glared at him. "You don't know that all of them are that serious. Were all the people you arrested for trying to conduct rituals of power insane?"

"The majority," Potter said, and flexed his fingers the way Draco had in the past to ease the pain of a Stinging Curse to the palm. "Why else would they even seek ultimate power in the first place?"

"I don't know," Draco said, and trailed his fingers over his glass, noting the way Potter's eyes followed his hand. "It doesn't seem much madder to me than seeking to sacrifice your heart."

"I didn't give up *all* emotions," Potter said, and this time probably sprang to his feet in preference to falling out of his chair. "I still felt them. You saw that. I could be irritated with you and not think it was such a good idea to take you after the magical animals."

Draco tilted his head back, smiling. He wondered if Potter was trying to intimidate him by standing over him. If so, Potter ought to learn that it wasn't going to work, the same way he ought to have known Draco wasn't going to just give him the horsehair, and Draco was happy to be the one to teach him that lesson.

*I could go on teaching him all my life.*

Draco thought about that, and gave a little nod. Well, he could do that as long as Potter was freed from the bloody ritual. Draco wouldn't fancy spending the rest of his life with a partner who could do nothing but gape at him foolishly when Draco made an amusing or witty remark. Or, worse, look at the wall and Draco with the same kind of gaze.

"You gave up all that made life worth living," Draco told him. "Passion. Strength of emotion. Rage. Love." He saw the way Potter's eyes were widening, and laughed aloud. "What, you never thought to hear someone like me saying that word? I assure you that I learned it when I was so young that I don't remember not knowing it, the same as you did."

Potter shook his head. "But—you never acted like you valued it when we were younger."

Draco rolled his eyes. "And you never acted like you wanted to be an automaton. I've *changed* since the war, Potter. I've changed since I had my freedom to do what I wanted. You probably have, too, but I've seen precious little sign of it." He paused, because Potter had made an aborted little movement, as if he was going to fold his arms in front of him, and then had done it behind his back instead.

Draco stared at Potter's locked fists as Potter turned his back on Draco and walked over to stare at a portrait frame on the wall. He didn't know where the words came from. Sometimes he could do it, though, this silent, crystalline insight into someone else's mind, the way he had sometimes known what people dueling him would cast before they did it.

“You don’t have your freedom at all, do you?” he whispered. “The prophecy is over, but not your sense of duty. That’s why you didn’t hesitate or ask your friends about this ritual. You thought you *had* to sacrifice yourself.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Malfoy, no one made me,” Potter said roughly, without turning around.

“*You* made you,” Draco said. “Or, rather, the stupid part of your soul did.”

Potter turned his head to give Draco a single-eyed look of disdain that would have been more impressive if Draco hadn’t just reminded both of them of what a fool Potter was. “Then no one but me did,” he said. “Which means I did it of my own free will.”

Draco shook his head. “I really don’t think so,” he murmured, while his mind raced. He knew what he wanted to say; the only problem was convincing Potter, really. “What would have happened if you were never the Boy-Who-Lived?”

Potter faced him fully now, staring hard at Draco’s face, as if that would enable him to figure out Draco’s tactics. Since Draco didn’t think it would, he kept his peace, and Potter folded his arms and looked away. “I would have grown up with my parents,” he muttered. “I would have been a lot happier. I would have known what magic was from the time I could walk, I reckon, and my godfather would have been there, and there would be no war, and Dumbledore would be okay...” His voice trailed off. “Well, maybe not, but someone else would have had to help kill him.”

Draco blinked. “How did *you* help kill him?”

“He was dying of poison when Snape killed him.” Potter’s eyes returned to Draco, but they had a sheen in them now that made Draco think he was seeing things very far away rather than in the room. “We had to go fight a trap that was guarding—something of Voldemort’s. Something important.”

*Something you still don’t want to mention even now, because you don’t trust me,* Draco silently completed that little story.

“I had to feed him the poison.”

Despite all his own memories of that night and how they had reason to make him less sympathetic to Potter rather than more, Draco winced. Potter smiled grimly at him. “Yes, it’s not pleasant, is it? But someone else would have had to do that if I wasn’t the Boy-Who-Lived. I would have been happy and maybe still on a Quidditch team and maybe in Slytherin. I don’t know.”

“You were a Gryffindor because that’s where the Hat put you,” Draco said carefully. “But you could have been in Slytherin? You acknowledge you have traits that would make you belong there?” Although he had trouble thinking of them at the moment, with Potter’s cleverness apparently in abeyance and his only visible ambition being to sacrifice himself.

“It told me that it could put me in there even just as I was.” Potter gave himself a little shake and looked at the portrait frame again. “But I didn’t want to. I knew Voldemort had come from Slytherin, and you were going to end up there, and you had just insulted the first friend I ever had. I didn’t tell it where I really wanted to go, just where I didn’t want to.”

Draco sighed mournfully. “And if you *had* been in Slytherin, I could have taught you better. Sacrifices don’t count unless you make them meaningful.”

Potter glared at him again. It was losing its impact for Draco, unless he could be sure that he could bring back the fire to Potter's eyes permanently. Then he might let himself relax and enjoy it. As it was, he glared flatly until Potter turned back and started pacing the room again, rubbing his elbows.

"Anyway," Potter said suddenly, spinning around and acting as though he might draw his wand. Draco, inside his house with elves everywhere, didn't do more than smile. "You never did say why you asked me that. What would it matter if I was the Boy-Who-Lived or someone else was? Someone else would be here, in that case."

Draco nodded. "Right. And I think being the Boy-Who-Lived has affected you even now. You don't know what to do with yourself when you're not fighting Dark Lords. You think that you could have kept every one of them from rising, and it's up to you to do it now, instead of making sure that other Aurors know about the threat. Instead of discussing your plans with anyone. Instead of making sure that the public takes them more seriously and does things like keep a close eye on the books they're getting these Dark rituals from. No, instead what you do is run out and do something on your own." Draco stood up, because he didn't think he could stay sitting down with the flow of words welling up from inside him. "I know that you had to act on your own with the Dark Lord, because there was the prophecy. But there's nothing here now that would make you do that. In fact, the more people that are involved, the more likely you are to catch all of them, because that way you have more people who know Dark wizards and can keep an eye on relatives and friends for you. Why did you do it all by yourself?"

Potter shut his eyes. His breathing was irregular, and a flush mottled his cheeks. Draco cocked his head and walked towards him. Potter gave no sign that he'd heard. Draco snorted. So much for the ritual making Potter more aware and a better defender of the world.

Potter opened his eyes and leaped back when he saw Draco so close. Draco stood there with his own eyes half-closed, waiting for Potter to recover. It was less fun when he wasn't paying attention to Draco.

"I had to do it," Potter said. "It was the perfect solution, and I was the only one who could make it work, and Ron—"

He clenched his mouth shut, but Draco now thought he knew part of what had happened when Potter talked with his friends. He smiled. "Yes? Weasley wouldn't have wanted you to do that? I wonder why that was?" He paused, but Potter only stood there breathing and said nothing, so Draco added, "He didn't like it, did he? I didn't think he was that much smarter than you are, but I suppose living with Granger rubbed off on him."

Potter shook his head. "You have no idea what you're saying," he whispered. "Stop. He—he didn't say that he would have been unwilling to help me."

"But he said that he would have found a different way," Draco said. "Helped you find something less dangerous, something where you were less likely to spill your secrets to the first person who asked about them. Something that would have *worked* to guard the world instead of making you into the lonely little sacrifice who did it all by yourself, right?"

Potter jumped forwards and pinned Draco against the wall with one hand around his throat, glaring at him. Draco shook his head and shrugged. "If it wasn't that, it was something a lot like it," he said. "And I bet Granger was even more emphatic, wasn't she?"

Potter broke from him and turned away, shaking his head. "If you're so much more intelligent and experienced and brave and wise, why do you even care what I do?" he snapped over his shoulder. "Leave me like this and make me defeat the last two animals on my own."

"I don't want to," Draco said, coming up behind him. "I dislike leaving things half-done. And I dislike being bored."

"This is only a way to keep from being bored, then," Potter said, sounding a little relieved. "I should have known it. You don't really want me or care about me. You only want some excitement in your life."

"Let me show you where excitement can lead," Draco murmured, and put his hands on Potter's cheeks, and kissed him again.

This time, it was an honest, passionate kiss, pouring what he felt into it, not simply trying to catch Potter's attention and hold him back. Draco opened his mouth wider and wider, sticking his tongue out, lapping at Potter's tongue, trying to coax him to respond *somehow*, so he could see that what Draco said was true.

And this time, after a single long moment when Draco felt anything might happen and tingled from the feeling, Potter began to kiss him back.

## Bright Flares of Temper

Draco stood there for long seconds, his hands buried in Harry's hair, enjoying the way that Harry twisted against him as though he wanted to touch Draco further but was forcing himself to keep his hands above Draco's hips. Draco would have pulled back and encouraged Harry not to hesitate on *his* account, but he was too involved in the deep, pulling kisses Harry had finally decided to give him.

Harry was the one who pulled back first, as always. He was flushed, panting so hard that Draco could see sweat forming on his chin. He leaned in to lick it off. Harry let him, and then abruptly pushed him out to the length of his arm, his hand planted right in the middle of Draco's chest.

Draco went with the motion, although he swayed a little, his eyes locked on Harry's face. Harry looked wide-eyed, dazed, wonderful.

"I don't know how you can do this," Harry whispered. His voice was hoarse, too, delightfully. "Say that you're right and my chain ritual was stupid. What are you going to do now that I've learned better? What are you going to do when the ritual is done?"

"Teach you other things," Draco said. "I find that people like you need a lot of instructing."

"People *like me*," Harry said, and glared at him. Draco was a little impressed. The wolf hadn't managed that particular look. Draco didn't think even his father in the depths of a cold rage could have. "What does *that* mean?"

Draco waved a lazy hand at him. "Stop it. I just meant there are people who think they have to carry all the burdens of the world on their shoulders, and no one else is ever going to do something to stop evil if they don't."

"No one *will*," Harry gave an aggressive little hop towards him, as though he thought Draco would run. Draco only stood and smiled at him, and Harry was the one who ended up turning his back and walking over to study the empty portrait frame that had fascinated him before again. "It's—it's ridiculous, what you're asking of me. What you *want*. You want me to stop being myself."

"No," Draco said. "I don't think the central core of you is a hero. You did what you did under protest and under a prophecy. I'm interested in seeing how you could grow beyond that, what would happen if you did."

Harry twitched his head back and glared at him. "You would try to stop me."

"Stop you from what? Using chain rituals, yes. Acting alone, yes." Harry stared at him, and Draco clucked his tongue. "This is what I keep trying to tell you, and which you keep ignoring. Most people don't fight evil by being under a prophecy, like you were, and the only one who can defeat the Dark Lord. Most people have *help*."

"Ron and Hermione helped me."

"Then why didn't you go to them with help about these cases and the rituals you're stopping?" Draco asked. He had once thought he would never find anything that concerned Harry's little



friends fascinating, but, well, life did surprise him sometimes. “I would have thought that would be your first instinct, to discuss how to stop the rise of Dark Lords *with them*, not obsess over it alone.”

Harry glanced away.

“Come on,” Draco said, and made a beckoning gesture with his hand at Harry that got him another glare. Draco ignored it. He would have been satisfied with that tribute that said he was annoying once, but Harry’s glares were nothing compared to Harry’s kisses. “You’ve admitted using the chain ritual was stupid and it needs to be ended. It even sounds as though you admit fighting the Dark Lord under a prophecy wasn’t ideal. Come a step further and you can have the delicious nuggets of wisdom I’ve kept for you.”

“I hate you sometimes,” Harry said, clearly and distinctly.

“I notice you haven’t retreated yet,” Draco said. “Or told me I’m horrible to my face.”

“I told you that enough in the past that I didn’t think you needed to hear it again,” Harry muttered.

“Oh, I always need to hear it, if you want me to leave you alone,” Draco said, smiling at him, and sucked in a delighted breath when Harry did some more glaring. “You don’t, do you? It’s lonely at the back of the crowd.”

“Oh, shut up,” Harry said, and came to sit down in his chair and drink the butterbeer he’d abandoned. Draco took his own chair, rubbing at his lips. Harry pointed his mug at him.

“If my kisses disgust you, I don’t know why you want them,” he said.

“I was savoring the taste, not trying to rub it off,” Draco said, and grinned at Harry’s befuddled expression. “Sometimes the world is pleasant to you. Sometimes you run into someone who admires the fire you bring to life—well, your *real* life—and wants to see it continue. And sometimes that person is you, and sometimes that person is me.”

“Who admires and chases you, then?” Harry leaned forwards.

“I hope you, eventually,” Draco said, and picked up his own drink, for the pleasure of letting the taste roll over his tongue. Well, for that and for the different kind of pleasure that lighted him at the sharp glance Harry darted him, as if he wondered what the drink tasted like. *He may have curiosities that butterbeer cannot assuage.*

“You’re serious about us staying together after the chain ritual is broken, then?” Harry looked Draco up from his feet, down from his head. “Even though I wouldn’t have much more to interest you once I turned back into a regular Auror?”

Draco pointed a finger at him. “I’m going to answer that question, but only if you tell me why you didn’t involve your friends in the chain ritual.”

“It’s like a Slytherin to bargain,” Harry said, his hands doing damage to the upholstery on his armchair.

“And it’s like a Gryffindor to be honest and open, keeping his word and trusting everything to his friends, but you didn’t,” Draco said, and smiled at him. “Think of what I’m doing as an attempt to

inject a little Hogwarts normality back into the conversation.”

Harry snorted despite himself, Draco thought, and then sighed. “All right. Fine. I didn’t go to them because I knew Hermione would try to talk me out of it. And I’m so *tired* of the thought that someone might succeed in making themselves a Dark Lord and undoing all the work I did. I wanted it to stop.”

Draco hesitated. He didn’t know if he was in the right place to say these words to Harry and have them be believed.

Then again, he probably hadn’t been in the right place to start shattering the chain ritual, either, or kissing Harry. So he went on. “Nothing they do can undo what you did. I know you gave your life for us, and that’s enough. No one can ask for a greater gift.”

Harry turned so red that Draco blinked. Surely he must have heard people praising him for that before? In fact, he was probably sick of it. Draco had wondered if he would get up and storm out of the room when Draco said those words, despite the fact that they had to be said.

Instead, Harry lowered his eyes, and swallowed. “I don’t—I’m not sure I understand why you admire it.”

“I didn’t want to be a slave,” Draco said. “Is that enough?”

“Yeah, but I mean,” Harry said, and gestured in the air. Draco thought he looked adorably uncertain of himself. It would be a pleasure to take him in hand and teach him the pleasures of certainty, too, of course. “I thought you wouldn’t admire me for sacrificing my life. You didn’t admire me for sacrificing my heart.”

Draco pressed his lips together, thinking hard. His immediate instinct was to be contemptuous of Harry for not knowing the difference, but he couldn’t blame him for that, really. Draco didn’t know he would have known the difference, either, from the outside.

“You considered all the consequences of what you were giving up in the Forbidden Forest, and did it anyway,” Draco said, shaking his head. “But you didn’t think about it this time, and that was stupid.”

“As we’ve established,” Harry flipped it away. “That’s enough?”

“Yes,” Draco said.

Harry sighed and nodded. “Anyway. I thought Ron and Hermione would talk me out of it and tell me to work with them, and that would have been better, but it would have taken so *long*. I thought this was a quick solution.” He grimaced a little. “Hermione tells me that I’m fonder of quick solutions than I should be. Maybe she’s right.”

Draco nodded, but found himself pinned to the back of his chair by the look Harry gave him next. “Now, explain to me why you think we would stay together.”

“Because,” Draco said, “I know you’re going to make other mistakes once you awaken from the full effects of this one. And your friends already didn’t manage to prevent you from making this one. Who’s going to take care of you if I’m not around?”

"I don't believe that," Harry said, and folded his arms, nearly hitting the mug of butterbeer with his elbow and knocking it to the floor. He snapped his arms open, moved the mug like it had personally insulted him, and crossed them again.

"I can assure you, your past record with mistakes is clear," Draco said, in the deepest voice he could muster, purely because he knew it would annoy Harry.

"I mean that it can't be much fun for *you*," Harry snapped at him. "You get to fight magical animals while you break the chain ritual, but what happens when that's gone? Is it going to be enough to keep you from boredom if you stay around me after that and correct all these mistakes you think I'll make?"

Draco watched him in silence for a bit, as Harry huffed and glared and in other words did everything he could to make himself look unattractive. Draco would have told him to stop that, but this time, he had the strong feeling that Harry was doing it on purpose.

"I think it could be enough," Draco said at last. "I stayed with one lover on the Continent for more than two years, doing very little but having sex and arguing and learning mountain-skimming and drinking fine wines. I would have stayed with him longer than that if he hadn't kicked me out."

"What a blow for you," Harry said.

It was all too clear that he meant the words to slice, but he wasn't used to speaking like that, and Draco grinned back at him. "It was. But I think he was getting bored with me. He was terribly domestic, and he wanted me to stay home and be with him for days at a time where we did *nothing*. Not even talked or had sex, just sat there. I couldn't stand it."

"I like being quiet, too," Harry said. "It's been a hard life. I don't think I'd suit you."

Draco shrugged again. "Maybe not, and then I would leave. But considering what brought us here, sorry, you'll forgive me for saying that I don't *entirely* believe you."

Harry huffed and folded his arms tighter. Apparently it just went to his heart not to be believed, Draco thought, and grinned. "This is an exception. You can ask Ron. He would tell you. I've been quiet more than usual these past few years."

Draco nodded. "Of course. You've just been hunting down people who use rituals to make themselves into Dark Lords, and people who steal Dark artifacts, and people who are insane. That isn't exciting *at all*."

"You couldn't come along and help with that," Harry said, leaning forwards, in such a prim and horrified voice that Draco couldn't help laughing. Harry shook his head. Draco thought he would have liked to leap up and shake *Draco*, but he held back, thank God. It would be silly if he'd come further. "You're not a trained Auror. And I don't think listening to me talk about it secondhand would be exciting enough for you."

Draco smiled lazily at him. "Why not? I have a lot of the skills of a trained Auror. I haven't done badly in the battles against your creatures, who are probably harder to fight than most of your enemies, thanks to their resistance to magic. And you should see your *face*," he said, the laughter overcoming him again. Harry looked a second away from clasping his hands to his heart.

"They wouldn't let you into Auror training," Harry said, trying to make his voice even lower, and

more precise this time, as if hearing the exact truth would somehow stop Draco from wanting this. “There’s no—there’s no way that someone would ever accept you here. Your name’s still smeared.”

“You hesitated before you said that,” Draco said, pointing at him. “Why did you hesitate before you said that? You should just announce it right out if that’s what you believe, not hesitate and fumble around like you did.”

“I was *trying* not to be mean.” Harry spat the words out like pebbles he had been chewing.

Draco nodded. “You care enough about me to worry about that. You should just speak unpalatable truths and tell me to cope with it, if you’re the kind of mindless Gryffindor that you’re trying to portray yourself as.”

Harry shook his head furiously. “I really don’t understand you. Did you think I would give in and join your side as soon as I tasted your tongue?”

His eyes dropped to Draco’s lips. Draco smiled and stretched his arms out along the back of his chair. “Why not? I have seduced someone who was about to kill me with my mouth, you know.” He plunged on before Harry could ask him about that, because technically it involved promises to the French Minister that Draco wasn’t supposed to break. “And what do you mean, my side? You can’t simultaneously believe me when I told you that I was doing this to cure my boredom and also think it’s some sort of complicated evil plot.”

Harry glared at him. His face was red enough to boil an egg, probably. Draco gave him another gentle smile. Harry knew the truth, that Draco might be able to join him and fight beside him, and he didn’t want to admit it. So he was reduced to spewing stupid lies when they weren’t the point.

“Anyway,” Harry muttered sulkily. “It still wouldn’t matter. They still wouldn’t accept you into Auror training.”

“Of course,” Draco said with a brisk nod. “I wasn’t planning on becoming an Auror. Just an unofficial helper who drops in from time to time.”

Harry stared at him and then turned his head away, blinking his eyes almost shut. Draco stared, then grinned in delight. The look in those eyes had been hard to decipher, but he knew it wasn’t envy or hatred.

“Was that—yearning?” he asked, making his voice as dramatic as he could. “Do you want some kind of helper after all? Have you wanted one in the past? Someone who’s not bound by the rules of the Auror Department, someone who could help you without having to appear in the official reports?”

Harry turned back towards him. He said nothing. Draco wasn’t sure he could. He folded his arms instead, a little defensive gesture.

They sat there like that for a few minutes, Harry’s head half-bowed, Draco watching him, until Harry looked up and whispered, “It’s not *fair* that you can read me so easily. Why is that? Why can you know all these things I want? Why can you see right into my heart?”

Draco stood up and crossed over to him. Harry looked up at him, not hiding, not flinching away. Just looking, and aching.

Draco bent down to rest his cheek gently against Harry's. Harry turned towards him and kissed Draco's cheek, although Draco thought that was partially coincidence, just the way Harry had turned his head.

"It's okay to want," Draco whispered. "Even to want someone to help you other than your friends, who you hid this from. It's okay to want a savior." He squeezed Harry's shoulder once more and stepped back from him. When he snapped his fingers, Niri, the house-elf who had brought their drinks, appeared again.

"She'll guide you to a room for the night," Draco told Harry quietly. "I hope you enjoy your rest."

He walked towards the door, and then Harry said from behind him, "What, no good-night kiss?"

Draco glanced back. Harry sat with his arms still folded, but his gaze fixed on Draco as though he was the only light in a dark room.

"It's fine to want things," Draco said. "But I think it's good to ask, too."

He waited. But although Harry opened his mouth again, no sound came out.

Draco nodded, and left. Harry needed to figure out what else he wanted. Draco had taken him as far as he could towards it.

## The Rose Leopard

“Good morning.”

Harry gave him the greeting in such a flat voice that Draco thought, for a moment, they were going to pretend that nothing had ever happened yesterday. He checked his own sigh of exasperation. If Harry wanted to pretend that, then Draco couldn't force him to do otherwise.

Then he saw the way Harry's cheeks flushed and he ducked his head behind the cup of steaming tea in front of him, and Draco smiled. He took the chair next to Harry instead of opposite him; from the startled way Harry twisted around to face him, that was against expectations. Draco also served himself from Harry's plate, noting that he had decided to trust the house-elves enough to eat a full breakfast today. Kippers weren't very important to Draco, but building trust with Harry was.

Draco took several delicate bites and swallowed, and then caught Harry's eye and raised his brows. “What? Is something wrong?” he asked, in great concern.

Harry flushed and glanced down. “No, nothing,” he muttered.

“Good,” Draco said decisively, and went on eating. Harry sat beside him, playing with the handle of his cup. Draco didn't smile. It wouldn't be wise, and what he wanted now was for Harry to come to wisdom *through* Draco, to see what mattered and what didn't, and stop blaming himself for ridiculous things.

*If that's possible.*

In the end, Harry did go back to eating and stopped darting looks at Draco that suggested Draco would burst into flames and consume him. But he froze again when the far door into the dining room opened and Draco's mother entered, shrugging into a delicate blue robe and placing a hand in front of her mouth to stifle a yawn.

Draco put down his fork and watched indulgently. He didn't believe for a single second that Narcissa had entered the room not knowing who was here, but he was willing to pretend with her if she wanted.

Narcissa lowered her hand, looked around the dining room as though surprised to see anyone there—although it was Draco's normal time to get up—and then widened her eyes comically. “Oh, goodness! Mr. Potter! I had no idea that our house had such a distinguished guest.” She came forwards with her hand held out. “Do forgive me for my lack of courtesy. Of course, I would have done something to make you welcome if I'd known.”

Harry took her hand and even bowed over it, but his eyes were sharp, and Draco grinned. Harry *had* to suspect that his father would at least have discussed the intrusion with his mother, even if she didn't intend to do anything about it.

“It's no problem, Mrs. Malfoy,” Harry said, and glanced at Draco from the corner of his eye, shaking his head a little. “Draco has been making me more than welcome.”

Narcissa glanced in turn at Draco, and raised her brows. Draco lowered his eyes demurely, and

sucked on the insides of his cheeks.

“Ah,” Narcissa said. “Good.” She turned to face Harry and clasped her hands together, her face lighting with that expression of benevolent good-will again. “But *please* let me know if you want for anything else.”

“I will.” Harry was holding his teacup, and it didn’t actually look like a barrier between Narcissa and his face. Draco approved. Harry had picked up a sense of politics from somewhere, maybe from those Ministry functions where he’d probably been forced to listen while everyone else discussed matters that bored him stupid.

“Good,” Narcissa repeated, and glanced around. “I find that I would like a tray in my bedroom after all,” she declared, and wandered out the far door.

Harry leaned back in his chair with an explosive breath. Draco went back to eating, but also to watching him, and blinked when he saw the way Harry’s eyes had crinkled with his frown. “What?” Draco asked.

“I didn’t mean to chase her away from eating here,” Harry muttered, and pushed his plate away, with more untouched food than Draco thought he ought to leave on it, considering how ridiculously thin he was. “I didn’t mean—do you think if I called her back and explained that we weren’t really having a *private* conversation, she would—”

Draco tried to restrain himself, but he couldn’t; the chuckles broke out of him. Harry turned to him, his arms folded and his face red enough to tell Draco that he had just entered the category of “enemy” again as far as Harry was concerned. “What?” Harry snapped.

“You saw through her playacting when she came in here and pretended that she hadn’t known you were here, but you don’t think she left to give us the chance to be alone?” Draco shook his head. “You are *stupid* sometimes.” But he let Harry hear the fondness with which he said it.

Harry flushed and lowered his head. His gaze remained on Draco, and Draco smiled. There was a look in those eyes, a light, that said Harry might go further than Draco had thought he would. He *might* ask. Draco found himself holding his breath, leaning forwards in his chair, his smile bright as he silently encouraged Harry to do it, to *ask*.

“You want to go after the next animal as soon as we finish our breakfast?” Harry asked his plate.

Draco sighed and eased back. It seemed he would have to give Harry a little more time to decide what he wanted. He could do that, Draco told himself. He could be patient. Not often, but when the reward was as great as this, then he could.

“Yes, of course,” Draco said, and reached into his pocket to pull out the cloak of white fur from the wolf, which he hadn’t dared shrink in case that altered some property of it, but which folded up to make a much smaller package than he’d expected. “Do you know what we have to do with this thing, besides take it along?”

Harry shook his head. His cheeks were bright, and he kept his gaze on the cloak as though the shining silvery color would advise him what to do next. Draco restrained himself from rolling his eyes. No, Harry had said that he didn’t have much knowledge of the magical animals, although he had known about the wolf’s ability to Apparate.

“Then take me to the place where your next challenge awaits,” Draco said, and stood up, leaving almost as much food on his plate as Harry had.

Harry stood with an anxious look almost perfectly divided between him and the plate. “Shouldn’t you—I mean, don’t you think—”

“That I should eat more?” Draco asked sweetly, and smiled as Harry blushed again. “I could ask the same of you.”

“I’m used to going without food for days at a time, if I have to,” Harry said, flinging back his head and scowling at Draco. Draco wondered what his parents would have said, could they see that scowl. It was a bit much to hope that his father would immediately pronounce Harry perfect for him, but he might think that Harry wasn’t such a bad addition to the Malfoy family, if he could be that fierce. “Auror training teaches you how to do that. But you—I don’t want you fainting just as we confront the leopard.”

Draco reached out to take Harry’s hand and play with his fingers for a moment, solely because Harry immediately reclaimed his hand and flushed another lovely color. He wouldn’t push Harry much more, but he could tease. “I won’t,” Draco said quietly. “Don’t worry about that. What matters is that you have enough food.”

“And you don’t matter, I suppose?” Harry seemed to have leaped straight into aggression. “Because I’m more important than you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Draco repeated, and gave Harry a smile before turning away. But he paused halfway through the movement, because he couldn’t *help* himself, and whirled back around to widen his eyes at Harry comically. “Harry! Are you telling me that you’re *worried* for your best enemy?”

Harry growled at him and stomped past him, snatching the wolf-fur cloak from Draco on the way. “Come *on*, then. I’m worried about how we’ll beat the leopard, not about you,” he tossed over his shoulder as he headed for the front door.

Draco did a little skipping step that Harry looked back in time to catch. Harry faced the front with what he tried hard to pretend was a disgusted snort.

He would have to try harder than that if he didn’t want Draco to take some pride in the sound, Draco thought contentedly.

\*

To Draco, it would have made sense for the leopard to have lived in the middle of the same humid jungle where the dog’s palace had been located. At least the wolf had lived in a forest and the horse in a place it could run and the eagle in the sky. Snakes in sewers and birds in caves were a bit more unusual, admittedly, but Draco could take that in stride.

But this...Draco stared at the trees rising around them, and then turned around and gave Harry a smile that made Harry raise his wand a little. At least that was a sign that he could read Draco the way Draco was learning to read him, Draco thought, half-proud.

“You put the leopard in a *swamp*?” Draco asked, and raised one foot, plunging it down into the middle of the murky water. It eddied around him and soaked his ankles, grey-green and covered



with a floating, gleaming scum that Draco was sure would cling to his clothes. Over the trees around them draped moss that made it look as though every single tree wore a lopsided wig. The smell in the air was horrific.

“I didn’t choose the landscapes,” Harry said, staring around. “The spell did.” But he sounded as though he didn’t think the chain ritual was a good idea anymore, even in the part of him that was still stupid, and that went a little way towards mollifying Draco.

Then Harry faced him and smiled a little. “But you can repair your clothes with charms, can’t you? Are you a wizard or not?”

Draco snarled at him and kept forcing his way through the water to avoid giving a lecture about magical cloth and how it never felt the same if you used a charm to repair it instead of a tailor’s complex and subtle magic. Harry had said that the Apparition would at least bring them near the point where the next magical creature was hanging about. It ought to be easy to spot a leopard in all of this. Their coats weren’t made for the camouflage.

But an hour passed, and the heat grew worse, and the smell grew worse, and the mosquitos buzzing over the waters grew worse, but nothing else changed. Draco tried to stand on a small island, a heap of moss-covered stone, in the middle of the water, and hope that helped, but all that did made him do was slide slowly down and back into the water, then fall with a sudden splash.

Harry just shook his head at Draco from the trunk of a fallen tree where he was sitting. “I never knew you knew those words.”

“I’m not always the perfect and polished pure-blood you think I am,” Draco said, shaking some water from the hem of his robe, or trying. It clung in thick, oily grey droplets. “Particularly when *my clothes are being ruined*.”

He expected some response to that, at least, even if it wasn’t compassion, and looked up in surprise when he didn’t get one. He saw Harry staring into the distance, between the twisting branches that pushed green to the furthest edge of ugliness. As Draco watched, Harry’s wand slowly rose.

“I think it’s close,” Harry whispered. “I thought I heard a snarl when you were in the middle of your little conversation about your clothes.”

Draco scowled and opened his mouth, and then went down into the water, choking, as the weight hit his back. Distantly, he heard Harry yell. He didn’t have time to hear what, because then water was flooding his ears and his mouth and his lungs.

The weight on his back continued to hold him down, and Draco could feel it half-vibrating, which probably meant it was growling. He still had hold of his wand, by some miracle, so he swished it through the water beside him and bellowed out the only spell that might help him in this particular instance.

He rose straight up, rebounding from the floor of the swamp—or the compacted mess of moss and mud and rock that substituted for the floor—as though it had suddenly turned into rubber. He spun and turned and saw the trees pinwheeling past him and reached out a hand, and meanwhile the leopard on his back was flung a good distance. Draco listened hard, hoping to hear it crack into a tree, but no such luck.

Draco caught a branch and spun himself around it at the angle that would let him land in the crook

of it without breaking either his arm or his back. He'd had practice on some of the wilder broom flights that he and Louis took. When he was motionless for the first time since he'd almost died, he writhed around and looked for the leopard.

It stood in the tree three over from his, silent except for the low snarl coming through its parted jaws and the noise its wildly swishing tail made as it hit the moss, and it was the strangest leopard Draco had ever seen.

Wild, beautiful in a way, but *strange*. The coat was a dark, dusty rose, shot through with deeper pink rosettes. Otherwise, it looked normal, with green eyes, even, but still. *Pink*. Draco giggled a little, hysterically.

The leopard crouched. Draco started to draw himself up, ready to voice another spell.

But then the leopard leaped, and Draco saw the reason it had knocked him into the water in the first place, the reason it was so dangerous. It moved faster than any normal creature could have, perhaps as fast in its spring as the horse in its run. It crashed into Draco again before the first syllable could leave his lips.

Draco started to roll off the tree branch, but he managed to press his back against the crook of bark and keep upright that way. The leopard was snarling directly into his face. Its breath smelled like carrion, and its paws had crept into the cloth at his sides, starting to draw down. Draco could feel the claws, as pointed as hooks.

He did the only thing he could think of, and screamed.

The leopard's ears flattened back along its skull, and it spat. That wasn't a reaction as severe as Draco had hoped for, but it gave him a second to make his decision, and he cast the spell he'd been thinking of before, one that raised a torrent of fetid water from the swamp below. Vaguely, he could hear Harry yelling, but since Harry wasn't obliging enough to come and rescue him right then, Draco thought he'd better manage.

The water grabbed the leopard and soaked its fur. It gave a sound that might have been an ordinary cat's startled cry and leaped off Draco, heading back through the air to the first tree where it had landed.

Potter's spell, or rather the water channeled by Potter's spell, hit it halfway there.

The leopard gave an agonized yowl. Its body tumbled and writhed, and the water bore it off course, slamming it into something solid enough that it sounded like stone. It slid down the stone, limply. Draco stood up and cast his next spell at a tree branch directly above it, thick enough, he hoped, to do the job.

The leopard had just started to lift its (*pink*) head from the water when the branch broke off from the tree. As Draco had hoped, the creature looked up at the sound instead of bounding out of the way. Or maybe it had been too badly hurt to bound.

The branch landed on top of it with what Draco thought was a satisfying thunk. The leopard yowled and then lay still, its paws twitching. Draco nodded and turned to look over at Harry.

He met a frown deep enough that he frowned back, wondering what he could have done. He had a few scratches, sure, but all in all, this had been the quickest of their battles, and the only real

damage done was to his clothes.

Then he remembered. The cloak of fur that the wolf had shed in their last fight, the cloak that was supposedly instrumental to defeating the next creature, still hung out of Harry's pocket. They hadn't used it at all in the battle against the leopard.

And the tree branch shifted and fell down into the water, and Draco turned around to see the leopard rise to all fours, as sleek and uninjured as it had been when this mad chase started. It was even totally dry, as though the water hadn't soaked it. It began to snarl again, though this time audibly enough that Draco could hear it at this distance, and started to crouch down for another of those magnificent leaps.

"The cloak!" Harry shouted, splashing towards Draco.

Draco turned his head and snapped, "Yes, of course, the cloak, I *know*. But that doesn't tell us what \_\_\_"

That was as far as he got before Harry, yelling incomprehensibly, snatched the cloak out, dragged it through the water—and Draco mourned in spite of himself at watching those white hairs turn foul—and flung it into the air. Draco stared up, and realized the cloak had come between the leopard and its intended target, muffling its head and getting caught around its neck.

But the target was Harry, not him, and in the next second the blinded leopard had hit Harry on the chest and both of them had vanished beneath the surface of the swamp.

## The Silver Cloak

Draco stared for a second at the place where the slimy water had started to close back over Harry's vanishing head, and then shook his own head briskly and reached for his wand.

Obviously he couldn't let *this* death stand. No one would ever believe that Harry Potter had been defeated by a pink leopard with a cloak on its head. They would accuse Draco of murdering him, and Draco probably couldn't find his way back to this swamp, which probably wasn't a real place anyway, and so he would go on trial, and into Azkaban, and all his parents' peremptoriness in summoning him back would go for naught.

He cast a stronger version of the spell he had used before to make himself bounce up from the floor of the swamp, but this time, he added a little extra twist that he had once heard Louis give it, when he wanted to prevent Draco from jumping into bed with him.

The swamp water gurgled and snorted like someone with a complex digestive problem. Then out of it came flying the leopard, and the cloak, and Harry, although Harry's arms were dangling by his sides and his face looked as though he had swallowed an alarming amount of liquid. Draco Summoned the cloak and created a Cushioning Charm against the branch of the tree that Harry was apparently headed for.

Harry hit it with a soft thump, which was at least better than a meaty one, and started to slide down. Draco cast another charm that turned the surface of the swamp soft and welcoming, and by the time Harry hit it, he was breathing again. Draco nodded. He knew that all those thumps Harry had taken had to be good for *something*.

As Harry turned on his side and spewed up a load of moss and slime, Draco turned his attention to the leopard.

It hadn't flown far. It stood on a branch, in fact, its tail writhing circles in the air above it, its eyes fixed unwinkingly on him.

"I told you that color wasn't good for camouflage," Draco told it, and unfolded the silver cloak from his arm.

The leopard's eyes fixed on the cloak, and it growled again. Draco nodded. On the one hand, he didn't like that this creature was intelligent enough to recognize a weapon that was dangerous to it. On the other, at least it was confirmation that the cloak *was* necessary, and probably not as a sodden blindfold.

Draco took a teasing little step to the side. The leopard leaped up to another branch and then towards him, again, with that quicksilver motion.

Draco whispered a spell. Nothing happened, at least to the unaided eye. The leopard gave a yowl that sounded smug as it flew forwards.

The yowl choked off a little, and also sounded less smug, as it hit the invisible barrier in midair. Its legs folded beneath it, and it slid down until it splashed into the water. There it stood, shaking its head and snarling.

Draco looked down at the cloak. He thought it was probably his imagination, but it seemed the cloak had trembled in his arms, as though it was a butterfly that wanted to spread its wings and fly.

But it didn't. And of course nothing as helpful as it taking off would actually happen.

But that tremble had given Draco an idea. The leopard was already preparing to spring, shaking its legs and tail as though it had once again healed its wounds. If Draco's idea didn't make the cloak take up its intended purpose, it at least should have the merit of serving as a good distraction.

Draco tapped the cloak and cast the Flying Charm. The cloak rose slowly from his arm, billowing, and Draco promptly cast more charms to remove the stains it had left behind from his skin. His robes would never be the same, of course, no matter how many Cleaning Charms he used, but Draco was resigned to that at this point.

The cloak swooped around him and brushed his face with one drooping fold; Draco jerked away in spite of himself from the warm touch of what felt like saliva on his cheek. The cloak whirled and faced the leopard as if Draco had given it a signal.

And now it was billowing like a Lethifold, and the leopard was staring at it and making no sound, and Draco could feel the delighted grin creeping up his face. He leaped down from the tree root into the water and made his way over to Harry with large splashes, still casting Cleaning Charms but not taking his eyes off the unfolding drama. The cloak had risen higher as though considering the best way to attack, and the leopard had crouched down. Draco wondered if it was afraid at last.

Then, once again, the leopard flew as if winged.

Up and up and *up* it flew, and Draco wondered why it wanted to get close to the cloak when it could hurt it, until he saw the way the filtered light glinted off the leopard's claws. He stared. What *would* happen when the leopard stuck its claws in the cloak and started to rip the wolf fur to shreds?

The cloak didn't wait to find out. It whirled around and fled through the tree branches. The leopard touched down on one of them for a moment, shook itself as though it had just woken, and then followed.

"Draco?"

Draco turned his attention back to where he reckoned it should probably already have been, on Harry. Harry reached out a shaking hand, and Draco knelt down in front of him and took it. He tried to smile reassuringly, but from the way Harry eyed him sideways, Draco wasn't sure he succeeded.

"What happened to the leopard?" Harry whispered. He glanced around, then added, "And the cloak? Did you save me from drowning?"

"I must admit that that was one of my many daring exploits," Draco said modestly. "How do you feel?"

"Like I'm going to have mosquitos hatching in my lungs soon," Harry said, and rolled over, and hacked. Draco took a prudent step back from the grey water that trickled out of his mouth, although, when he thought about it, it wasn't much different from all the other water that was

seething around his ankles. “But thank you for saving my life.” He blinked at Draco. “But you didn’t answer my other questions about the leopard and the cloak.”

Draco opened his mouth.

Then they reappeared and answered the question themselves. The cloak skimmed like a kite around the same branches it had vanished between, making tight turns that Draco sighed with envy at. If he could have mountain-skimmed like *that*, he would have won that last race with Sylvie, and wouldn’t have had to listen to her bragging for the next fortnight.

Behind the cloak came the leopard, bounding off the branches and ricocheting off the trunks with reflexes faster than Draco *knew* his were, and he wasn’t even sure about Potter’s. The leopard’s mouth was open, and it made a trilling, purring noise that caused Draco to wince. It seemed likely that the leopard would win the race, and catch up the cloak in a moment, and slash through it the way it had already tried to do.

“Draco!”

Harry’s arms grabbed him around the waist, and although he would have been thrilled about that ordinarily, Draco had been watching the chase. He turned to Harry with his mouth open, about to ask why Harry was so determined to pull him back under the surface of the water that Draco had just put great effort into *escaping* from.

But they splashed down before Draco could ask, and he slammed his mouth shut before anything could crawl inside. Treading water, he looked up in time—

In time to see the contest reverse.

No matter how unnecessary he thought Harry’s dive had been, he had to forgive it, because he got to see this.

The cloak had turned around just above the water. It was flapping slowly, new wings out to the side now, steadier ones than it had had so far. And it no longer looked like a kite, and as much as was possible with something that didn’t have eyes or a face, either, it looked *angry*.

The leopard had come to rest on a huge stump, with the rest of the tree lying somewhere in the desolate mossy water behind it, perhaps four meters away. It stared at the cloak and shot its claws in and out. The purring, trilling sound had faded without a trace.

Then the cloak shot forwards.

The leopard rose and zigzagged away, ridiculous pink tail trailing behind it, but just as it had given the cloak a challenge in speed, the cloak could do the same thing. Up and around they went, at times almost vanishing into the sky above the swamp—as much as a giant pink cat and a silver wolfs-hair cloak could vanish, anyway—and at other times skipping across rocks and blowing through great billows of water.

Draco laughed, and continued laughing as Harry lifted his head from the swamp and stared. That might have had something to do with the curl of moss that was hanging around Harry’s ear, too. Draco reached up and started plaiting it into Harry’s hair, and Harry reached up and swatted his hand away.

“What are they doing?” Harry whispered. “What was the point of the first chase they had if the cloak could turn around and do this any time?”

“I think, if you want my considered opinion,” Draco said, and then paused so Harry would look at him.

Harry turned and frowned at him. “Yes? What?”

“I think the cloak was fucking with its head,” Draco confessed, leaning near enough that he could have kissed Harry if Harry had wanted to cross the last small space that separated them.

Harry scowled at him and chose to turn back to the chase instead. Draco again looked up as another interesting thing happened.

The leopard had returned to a crook of a tree, where it had backed itself so that its hindquarters were up against the wood and relatively thick leaves shielded it from above. It was snarling, and its hair stood on end on its tail, and it would have looked more impressive if it wasn't so *pink*.

“Why is it pink, anyway?” Draco asked Harry in a mutter.

“I made it out of a rose petal,” Harry snapped back.

Draco raised his eyebrows and turned back as the cloak dived down and rose cradling a huge overflow of swamp water in the center of itself. The leopard spat in response, and then seemed prepared to abandon its defensive position after all and soared outwards, paws spread as though to embrace death.

The cloak embraced it instead, winding around the leopard's head and neck and front legs the way that Harry had tossed it the first time. This time, though, Draco imagined there was rather more of the swamp inside the cloak with it, and from the panicked thrashings the leopard was doing, it also couldn't breathe.

They both fell into the water then, and the cloak seemed to have lost its ability to fly. Instead, it simply wrapped tighter and tighter around the leopard, fold after fold after fold. The silver gleam dulled. The leopard slowly stopped moving.

For a few seconds, they floated together in what Draco had to think of as a perfect symbiosis. He hoped they could keep the cloak afterwards. Cleaned of swamp water, it could come in useful.

But both cloak and leopard dissolved like mist on a hot day, and merged. A silver rose, entirely artificial if the way its stem and petals curled was any indication, bobbed on the water where it had been, instead.

Harry coughed. Draco patted his back, while Summoning the rose. He didn't want to wade back into the middle of a small whirlpool to get it, and he hoped this way, they would get it before it sank, which would be the usual fate of a metallic rose in the middle of a swamp.

When the rose landed in his hand, however, Draco gasped and held it to his face before he thought about it. Harry rolled his eyes audibly beside him. “It's not going to have a scent, you know,” he pointed out. “Being made of metal and all.”

“Shut up,” Draco said, and suited his actions to words with a cuff on the back of Harry's head. “I

was just thinking about how light it was.”

Then he tucked it away into one of the bags hanging from his belt that he’d brought for that purpose and turned to Harry. “All right,” he said. “So I want to know. Why a *rose petal*?”

Harry stared at him for a second, then shook his head. His hair was slick on one side and half-green, Draco saw, and a tendril of a creeper had wound about his neck. Draco pulled it gently free, keeping a stern eye on Harry all the while, in case he tried to avoid answering the question.

“Why are you so surprised?” Harry asked. “I had to have eight objects that were different colors to make the parts of the chain ritual. I already had brown and white and red and other things that were more natural colors for animals. I don’t think a rose leopard is any worse than a blue eagle or a silver horse.”

“A *pink* leopard.”

“It was *rose*,” Harry said, and nodded at the bag that Draco had put the silver rose into, as though that was some kind of proof.

“Whatever it was,” Draco said firmly, “it was silly, and you’re not to do it again.”

Harry spent a moment blinking at him before he broke out into a grin. Draco bent down and tapped Harry in the middle of the lightning bolt scar, purely to see his eyes cross.

“What was that for?” Harry asked.

“For your silly grin,” Draco said, and Harry’s smile broadened. “Do you think I want to spend the rest of my life following you around rescuing you from—”

“It seems to me that you already volunteered,” Harry pointed out. “At least, if you were serious about following me around after I go back to being an Auror and helping me with those cases of people becoming Dark Lords.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” Draco said, although he could feel a fluttering pulse of warmth behind his heart. “I don’t want to spend the rest of my life following you around and rescuing you from *pink leopards*. I refuse to be part of anything so ridiculous, and I would *condone* being ridiculous because my mere presence would lead people to *assume* that I am part of it. I *refuse*. Do you understand?”

Harry was smiling up at him, and his smile had gone gentle in a potentially embarrassing way. Luckily, Draco thought, his own voice had an embarrassingly affectionate tone, so as far as that went, they were at least well-matched.

“I do,” Harry whispered, and hesitated for a second. Draco looked around. He couldn’t see anything else in the swamp, and in any case, every next magical animal they’d met as part of the chain ritual lived in a different kind of landscape.

“What?” Draco whispered back, when the hesitation had gone too long for it to be out of fear. At least, the normal kind of fear.

“I want to kiss you,” Harry said, in the same kind of whisper, more worried than afraid. “But I know that I had my mouth full of swamp water, and that might have given me permanent halitosis.



Do you still want to try it?"

Draco leaned down and answered the question with his lips and tongue instead of words, because most of the time words only led to misunderstandings between him and Harry. Harry sighed beneath him, his hands reaching up to get tangled in the hair at Draco's neck. Draco tensed for a second, because he remembered that his hair had got wet at some point, but then, so had Harry's hands and *his clothes*, and at least Draco's hair would be the same again once he took a shower. He kissed back and pressed into the hold.

Harry finally leaned away from him, still kneeling on the surface of the water that Draco had turned into a springy mattress to catch him. He cleared his throat. Draco took the chance to admire him. Harry looked gorgeous like that, he thought, still with his face all wet on one side and his mouth and eyes shining and wet in the middle of everything.

"This is still kind of weird for me," said Harry.

"I know," Draco said, and patted his hand. "For me, too. I had lots of lovers when I was on the Continent, but most of them weren't the sort I met in the middle of cleaning up their mistaken magical rituals."

"Lots of lovers?" Harry's voice had deepened a little.

Draco blinked innocently at him. "No one current. Except for you, of course, if you want to take the position."

Harry flushed, but said, "I just—I don't know if I can compete with the kinds of lives they must have led."

Draco's lip quivered, but he managed to fight down the laughter that would otherwise have come bursting out. "Yes, of course," he said gravely. "I can see that. After all, defeating a Dark Lord and a basilisk and being the youngest Seeker in a century and dying to save the wizarding world are what *everyone's* doing these days."

Harry stared up at him. "But you said you hated that side of me."

*Oh.* Draco understood Harry's insecurity now, and knew it wasn't really about competing with Draco's past lovers, so as much about competing with Draco's past image of him. He shook his head and touched the back of Harry's neck. "I hate the way you sometimes misuse it," he said, "to try and sacrifice yourself. I think that you should remain alive a lot longer, and continue to delight the world." He bent down so that his lips were next to Harry's ear. "And me."

Harry's returning kiss said he had forgotten all about the swamp water, and Draco was glad.

## A Many-Colored Rest

“What are we doing back here? I thought you would want to finish the chain ritual off as soon as possible.”

Draco smiled at Harry as he helped him through the wards on the edge of the Malfoy property. A slight examination of those wards from the corner of his eye showed that they didn't have any damage from the pounding on them that Harry had done the other day. *Good*. Draco didn't want to explain *that* to his father, who was barely reconciled to his choice of partners as it was.

“It's true that we should probably finish it off soon,” Draco said, and Levitated Harry off the ground and into his arms. Harry made a surprised grunting sound, and Draco nearly made the same. Harry was heavier than he'd thought, although part of that was probably that his clothes still had some swamp water soaked in. He cast a Lightening Charm and took care of one part of the problem. “But one more day won't make any difference, and we both need some rest.”

Harry blinked up at him, and Draco checked, but it seemed to be true: his eyes really were *that* guileless. “But, Draco, we spent all last night resting.”

“I think,” Draco said, bending over to whisper into Harry's ear as if it was a great secret, “that I'm feeling the need for something more than that. Such as more time, and a leisurely meal, spent in the presence of someone I like.”

Harry blinked a little, as though the thought of being liked at all was extraordinarily new to him. Then he smiled a little, as if forced against his will. “Well. How can I say no to that?”

Draco smiled and pretended to fan himself as he carried Harry inside the house. “How relieving. I had the impression that you never took a holiday.” He raised his voice. “Niri!”

The house-elf who had brought them their drinks the night before appeared at once, eyes widening as he stared at the way Draco cradled Harry. “Master Harry is being injured?” he breathed, as if he couldn't imagine anything more horrifying.

“Not injured, just tired,” Draco said, because he didn't want to deal with a frantically squeaking house-elf right now. “Can you help me get him up to his bedroom and get him comfortable in the bed?”

That made Harry's face turn a delightful shade of red. Draco leered at him, ignored by Niri, who bobbed his head fast enough to make his ears flap against his cheeks and exclaimed, “Yes, of course, Master Draco!” He reached out and took Harry's feet, and as always happened with house-elves, who could handle loads much larger than their size would indicate, Draco felt as though he was suddenly holding a small package. He took the stairs almost two at a time, to watch Harry's eyes cross. He didn't seem to know who he should watch with more surprise, Draco or Niri.

They reached the top of the stairs and turned right, and Draco nodded approvingly as the oaken door opened to reveal Harry's rooms. They were the ones reserved for the most honored guests of the house, which of course Harry was. But his mother must have arranged them, because Draco knew his father would probably have preferred to show Harry the cellars.

The rooms behind were a small suite, only sitting room, private dining room, bedroom, and bathroom, but then, most of the guests who stayed here would expect to eat and spend the majority of their day with the family. The colors were deep blues and browns, making Draco feel as though he walking underwater. Harry grunted and struggled a little as they carried him into the bedroom.

“This is getting silly,” he hissed, when Draco bent down so he could hear him. “I can walk, you know. And I wasn’t hurt.”

“I don’t want to take chances with you,” Draco said.

Harry fell silent and eyed him as though he had no idea whether he was serious. Draco let him go on wondering as he placed Harry gently down on the royal blue sheets of the bed and began to tug off his shoes.

“You don’t need to do that.” Harry sat up and held his hands over his shoes as though he imagined that Draco would be driven to ravish him by the sight of his naked ankles.

Draco beckoned Niri back and stepped away himself, holding Harry’s eyes and smiling until Harry blushed and looked away. Draco clucked his tongue. “Of course you must let us do what we can to make you comfortable,” he said, pitching his voice low. “Niri, will you go and get some hot water and massage oil for me?”

“At once, Master Draco!” Niri said, his ears jerking and his eyes practically overflowing with tears. Then he vanished.

“*Massage oil?*” Harry gaped at him. Draco had to laugh, though he managed to contain it to mostly silent chuckles. He thought Harry would be put off if he decided Draco was making fun of him. “You don’t need to do that. I didn’t even strain a muscle!”

Draco sniffed. “Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?” he asked. “With the way that you were being flung around in the water and into trees, I wouldn’t be surprised if you did get injured. Maybe you didn’t feel it, what with the adrenaline and the need to guard your back, but you will soon. And I don’t know anyone I trust more than myself to tend to you.”

“But I *don’t have anything*.” Harry clutched his shirt. “And wouldn’t I have to take my clothes off for you to give me a massage?”

“That is the general idea.” Draco leered at him.

“But it’s silly,” Harry said, and now he seemed to have decided that Draco was under a delusion that Harry could talk him out of if he just used small words. “Don’t you understand? I’m not injured. You don’t need to spend the time helping me.”

Draco let the smile fade, and stepped closer when Harry had just begun to look uncomfortable. “But I *want* to,” he whispered.

Harry looked at him, the same long and careful look that Draco thought he would have given to someone under the Imperius Curse, to make sure this was really what they wanted. Draco tried to look as powerful and convincing as he could when he had no idea whether this would work out or not. He was glad that Harry wasn’t a vampire, or simply gifted like a few of the lovers Draco had had in the past, and thus couldn’t hear his heart beating wildly.

“You really want to,” Harry said. “You don’t think you still need to convince me to trust you?”

Draco decided that he might as well push the boundaries a little more, since Harry hadn’t fled screaming, and picked Harry’s hand up long enough to plant a kiss on the back of it. “I don’t need to do that now, do I?” he whispered.

Harry’s face turned red much more slowly than it had before, as though he had had time to think about this blush. Then he turned his back to Draco, swallowing slowly, and began to undress.

Draco let Harry take his time with his shirt, and leaned back so that he could take in every inch of the lingeringly revealed skin. It was red, too. When Harry decided that he was going to blush in delicious embarrassment, he certainly didn’t do it halfway.

“Relax,” Draco whispered, as Niri came back with the oil and Harry jumped as though Lucius had walked into the room. “You’re safe with me.” He held up the oil and let Harry see exactly how much was in the canister, even as he shook it teasingly back and forth. “I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you.”

“Anyone else in the house, either?” Harry was delaying, his eyes flickering back and forth between Niri and the door.

“Not anyone else in the house, either,” Draco said, and although he smiled, he reached out and put a hand on Harry’s shoulder that didn’t shake at all. Why should it, when Draco meant what he said? “Not anyone at all.”

Harry closed his eyes and breathed in a few times, and either that calmed him down enough to accept this, or he decided that he wasn’t going to understand and he might as well just go with it. He stretched himself out on the bed on his stomach, grunting a little. Draco nodded. He had mainly proposed this because he thought Harry needed to relax and Draco wanted to touch him, but it wasn’t impossible that Harry had a strained muscle or two somewhere after all.

Draco let his hands carefully and casually explore Harry’s back for a few minutes before he settled down to stroking. Harry jerked and bucked a few times, but he calmed faster than Draco had thought he would. He even glanced over his shoulder when perhaps five minutes had passed, his brows lifted. “I thought massage was also supposed to involve *oil* at some point,” he said.

“Just admiring you,” Draco said.

He made sure to meet Harry’s eyes directly, and say that with no smile. He would have done those things *anyway*, because they were true, but Harry still flushed deeply and ducked his head, swallowing against the sheets.

There was a lot to admire, Draco thought, as he finally poured oil onto his palms and prepared to massage Harry. Not that Harry was overly-muscled, the way some of the Aurors were who spent hours and hours working on their physical condition. That he wasn’t was part of the *point*, Draco felt. He got results despite being slender, and he had scars, some of them pale and curving down around his ribs, but he was still alive.

*Gloriously so*, Draco thought, and licked his lips, and slid his hands into place.

Harry sucked in his breath hard enough that Draco thought his hands would fly off Harry’s back for a second. Draco rolled his eyes and pressed down, keeping still but steady. Harry finally sighed

and let his breath out again.

“That’s it,” Draco whispered into his ear, his hands smoothing back and forth in slow circles, his thumbs sinking down into muscle until Harry groaned. “It’s fine. I’m not going to hurt you. You don’t need to worry about anything here.”

He pressed down again and again, choosing different spots but exerting about the same pressure, until Harry began to truly relax. Before, he had seemed to hold himself in check from moving or distrusting Draco, but now he lay there and was limp beneath his touch, giving into it, surrendering.

“You can do this,” Draco whispered into Harry’s ear, not bothering to conceal his wonder and delight. Harry turned his face slightly towards him, though not more than enough to reveal one bright eye. “I didn’t think you could, but you can. Even when you’re still influenced by the chain ritual, even when you don’t have much reason to trust me. You *can*.”

Harry smiled and closed his eye again. Draco moved back up and knelt on the bed behind Harry. It was starting to seem less important that Harry hadn’t removed his trousers. So Draco couldn’t massage him everywhere. That didn’t matter. It mattered far more what he could touch on Harry’s back, the bare skin and the smooth scars, and the way that Harry, after a long hesitation in which Draco could practically feel the breath dancing up and down in his lungs, parted his legs so that Draco could kneel between them, close to his arse. For that, Draco rewarded him with the hardest pressure yet, and then skated his hands up the middle of Harry’s back, along his spine, sliding in until he could feel Harry’s vertebrae beneath his nails.

“Why does that work?” Harry said, so stifled with the breath traveling out of him that Draco should have had trouble understanding him, but didn’t. He attributed that to how attuned to Harry’s voice he was now. Harry could whisper his name on the other side of a dark room, and Draco would hear it.

“What do you mean?” Draco whispered, near Harry’s ear, wishing to see what would happen.

Harry didn’t start or try to move away, just turned his head blindly in Draco’s direction. His eyes were shut, his mouth slightly open, and it seemed to take him long seconds to speak because he was trying to get his tongue and teeth into order to do it. “You’re pressing so *hard*. Why does it feel so good?”

Draco kissed the edge of his forehead and moved back again, so that he could really kneel and work Harry’s lower back, near his arse. “You’ve never had a massage before, Harry?” he asked. “Or just not one like this?”

Harry swallowed, and then the carefully-gathered air came out in a groan. Draco smiled and increased the weight of his massage. The sounds Harry was making didn’t encourage him to move *away*, he had to admit.

“Never had one before,” Harry finally said.

Draco had to close his eyes and concentrate on the regular movements of his fingers for long seconds before *he* could continue. “So you’re a virgin in several senses of the term,” he said.

Harry grew tense again for a second beneath him, though mostly in his legs and feet, not in the parts Draco was touching. Then he huffed and shook his head. “Only you would think of it that

way. What does it matter whether I'm a virgin or not?"

"What do you mean, what does it *matter*?" Draco dug into a knot that hovered right above Harry's waistline, and noticed the tremors that ran up his legs, firming them. Draco wanted to touch, but kept his hands where he knew they were welcome. "Of course I'm going to value every experience that I'm the first one to introduce you to."

"But—"

Harry fell silent, not because of the way that Draco touched him, Draco knew, but because he was wrestling with something. That wouldn't do. Draco dug in again, and Harry gasped, back flexing.

"No silences between us," Draco whispered. "Why would you think that I wouldn't want you to be a virgin?"

Harry snorted into his pillows this time, but Draco's teasing tone seemed to have given him his confidence back, the way Draco intended. This was the arena they knew each other from, the competition of trading insults, flickering back and forth as fast as swords. "Because everyone knows that virgins don't make good lovers. Or virgins in other areas don't make good partners, either. You have to spend all your time coaxing them and teaching them and—God knows what else."

"You wouldn't know, would you?" Draco whispered, bending down to lick his ear. Harry shivered, but didn't retreat.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked. "If you mean, I wouldn't know because I am one, well, *right*."

Draco shook his head, making sure that he kept near enough to Harry's face that his hair moved there and stirred Harry's skin into prickling little bumps of gooseflesh. "No, you wouldn't know because you've never been with me, or anyone like me," he murmured.

Harry laughed this time, and that sound made Draco close his eyes and tilt his head back. "A high opinion of yourself seems to be required to be a Malfoy," Harry muttered, and again Draco could make out every word, despite half of them being said into cloth.

"Well," Draco said, and closed his eyes, bending down like a branch above Harry, moving his lips to the back of Harry's neck. "You know, I'm not claiming that I'm unique. Just rare."

Harry paused, then said, "You mean you're not talking about Malfoys being better lovers than anyone else?"

"No," Draco said, and he let the smile stay in his voice, the way he wouldn't have for anyone but Harry. "I'm talking about people who value new experiences, who like the fact that they're teaching someone for the first time. Yes, there are people who don't enjoy virgins. They take time. They take effort. They take patience." He focused his thumbs on the place on Harry's nape where his hair had brushed. "But think of the way I've pursued you, Harry. What in that particular combination of activities makes you think that I don't enjoy focusing on you?"

Harry breathed in and out, and put things together in the logic of his mind, including all the effort Draco had been willing to spend on him when he didn't know if there would be a result. At least, Draco thought he was doing that, *hoped* he was doing that. His hands continued to rub and roll, and then he moved back so that he was straddling Harry's hips, grinding down a little so there could be

no doubt about what Harry was doing to him.

Harry caught his breath in a little gasp, but didn't act nervous. Instead, he said, steadily this time, "I wouldn't think of you as a patient person."

Draco laughed into his ear. "Well, it's true that it takes the right combination of factors to make me *want* to be patient. But you have them."

A pause, and Harry asked, the stutter back, "W-what are they?"

Draco closed his eyes. "Hmm. You're not the sort to compliment-fish. You really don't know." Harry quivered beneath him, but Draco continued. "Fire. Determination. You throw yourself whole-heartedly into things, and so do I. You've led an unusual life, and you're still *alive*. I like that, Harry. I could love it, if you let me."

Harry took a deep, shivering breath, as if he was standing on the edge of a precipice and about to fling himself off.

And then he lay there and let Draco touch him, which might be the bravest thing he had ever done.

Draco kissed his neck, and kept caressing him.

## The Golden Chain

“Draco. I must discuss something with you.”

Draco looked up, his eyebrows arching. He had expected to see Harry and perhaps his mother at the breakfast table, but not Lucius. Still, he nodded a greeting and pulled the chair out so that his father could sit down. It didn't do to ignore Lucius when he was in this kind of mood. It was the same mood he had used when he summoned Draco home. Draco folded his hands in front of him now, watching as his father worked his way through the cup of tea that the house-elves brought him. This was another piece of the ritual.

“Mr. Potter is in the best suite of rooms in the house,” Lucius said, when he had apparently finished sipping enough tea to make his important point.

“I'm surprised at you, Father,” Draco said, with a little shake of his head. Lucius looked up, too quickly to conceal the flash of hope in his eyes. Draco smiled faintly at him, tilted his head, and said, “It's *Auror* Potter. He earned that title fairly, no matter what he might have done to irritate you in the past.”

For a few seconds, his father sat still. Then he lifted his cup of tea in a salute, and said, “You remind me of important matters of etiquette every time you visit, Draco. I must not cease to be grateful to you.” He sipped, not taking his eyes from Draco's face.

Draco smiled modestly. Then he waited for his father to reach the real point. He should have known better than to try to begin a skirmish with a mere statement of fact. It wasn't worthy of either one of them.

But worthy, perhaps, of the soft opponent that Lucius had expected to find in his son. Draco trusted that he had showed him otherwise.

Lucius cleared his throat once, gently. “What are your intentions towards Auror Potter?” he asked, leaning forwards.

Draco saw no point in trying to disguise his slow, delighted smile. “Why, Father,” he said, pressing his hand against his chest. “I had no idea that you intended to play the part of *Harry's* father in this little marriage drama.”

Lucius would have banged his hand down into his hands if he was a lesser man, Draco thought. As it was, he retracted his lean across the table, sinking back in his chair instead and closing his eyes as if he were very tired. “Draco,” he breathed. “You will oblige me by *shutting up and listening* for once in your life.”

“I don't see why,” Draco said. “I already know what you would say, and it would be boring for you to recite and for me to listen to. Why shouldn't I save us both some unnecessary effort and summarize?”

His father's eyes flickered open. He looked at Draco, and said nothing. Draco knew his mother would say that was a sign he had gone too far, and he should remember that he was still Lucius's heir, rather than Lord of the Manor himself.



But Draco had long since passed the point where he could be intimidated by mere silence. If the silver horse and the quartz wolf hadn't managed it, the man who had merely brought him into the world and subsidized his lifestyle wouldn't, either. Draco began to tick off points on his fingers. "You'll say that I need to find someone proper to marry, so that I can stop scandalizing wizarding society with my multiple lovers."

"I would not have said that," Lucius said, interrupting for no reason, Draco thought, except to prolong things, "because your mother and I have never told anyone in British wizarding society about your lovers."

Draco smiled at him out of sheer pity. "Oh, Father," he said. "And you think none of my *lovers* have relatives in Britain who they write to often and drop my name to?"

Lucius's hands briefly firmed on top of the table before he put them under it and out of sight. "I can think of no one who would spread the news," he said.

Draco clucked his tongue. "The point is that they know, and you know, and they know you know, and you know that they know that you know. So it matters." He touched his second finger. "And you don't think Potter a proper match for me. He won't produce children, he fought on the other side of the war, and you don't like him."

"That, I never said," Lucius said.

Draco rolled his eyes at his father. He really must train him out of his habit of interrupting, he thought. It would become tiresome if it was allowed to continue. "Only because it would be suicidal to state openly in British wizarding society that you dislike the Boy-Who-Lived," he said. "But I saw the look in your eyes when you gazed at him the day before last. Yes, he is a visitor. He's also a guest, one I invited and who will stay as long as I want."

Lucius had learned. He sipped his tea and said nothing.

Draco smiled. "I can still have the ability to invite guests over as your heir, I suppose?"

"Ah," Lucius said. "The important word in that sentence is *heir*."

Draco felt his heartbeat speed up. He had expected his father to get to the threats when complaints failed to hold him, but not so soon.

"Do tell," he breathed.

Lucius's lips narrowed a little, as though he had expected Draco to be groveling in front of him at this point instead of resisting, but he nodded shortly and said, "If I declare that you are not my heir any longer, you lose that privilege of inviting guests."

"Along with the Manor and my vaults, of course," Draco said, nodding. "Planning to keep me on a golden chain, Father?"

Lucius's fingers tightened around his teacup. "You are the one who made this necessary, Draco. Your mother tells me you have no intention of giving Potter up."

"Perhaps you could have asked me that?" Draco said.

His father turned to him. "Then you do intend to give Potter up?"

"Well, no," Draco conceded. "But you still could have *asked* me if I did."

Lucius closed his eyes and shook his head. Draco recognized that he was settling in for a truly epic scolding, and he attempted to fold his hands and look penitent. Then he sighed and took his hands apart. Keeping them in that position hurt, and there was no chance that his father would ever believe him, anyway.

"I have allowed your outrageous behavior to continue," his father began. Draco nodded a little, impressed; he had thought Lucius would begin with "unacceptable," and was surprised at the choice of a different adjective. "As you point out, it has been on the Continent, and so I could hardly accuse you of flaunting it in the face of proper wizarding society. But your mother and I called you home for a reason. It is *high time* that you learned the limits of what you can do. Young wizards may experiment. Everyone does."

*Except you*, Draco thought, looking at Lucius's frozen face. Lucius had told him again and again that he was happy to become a "proper" wizard, happy to marry Narcissa and begin a family. The only reason he could express approval of experimentation with a straight face was that he had allies who might abandon him if he didn't.

*Your allies aren't here, Father*. Draco was fond enough of Lucius, but he wished his father understood him better. He ought to know that there were certain things Draco would do cheerfully to oblige him and concentrate on those, instead of the things that Draco wouldn't do for a big pile of Galleons.

"But your experimentation is at an end." Lucius looked as if he wanted to slap the table and make it shake, but in the end, he sniffed and settled for putting both hands on the edge and scowling at Draco. Even then, his "civilized" training wouldn't let him get away with putting his elbows on the tabletop, Draco noted. "I did not wish to have to threaten you. Now I see I must, since you will not abandon your outrages any other way."

Draco mentally deducted the point he had awarded his father for using the unexpected "outrageous." Repeating "outrages" showed a lack of creativity that Draco had a hard time forgiving. Draco shook his head. "If you could tell me in any detail what my unacceptable behavior consisted of, Father, then perhaps I would have an easier time correcting it after I settle in England permanently."

Lucius's breath caught. He still could look young and innocent and naive, Draco noted. He decided that was probably a political trick his father had practiced, but one that didn't serve him as well with his own family. "Then you will stay here?"

Draco smiled. "I have incentive now."

Lucius nodded, once as if to himself, and once that was almost a bow to Draco. "Well, good. I did not enjoy threatening you with disinheritance. I am glad that you think enough of family honor and tradition--"

Draco rolled his eyes and interrupted. Perhaps it betrayed the spirit of what he had learned during his last few years, but he couldn't let his father persist in the farce any longer. "My incentive to stay here is Harry, Father. Not the threats that you'll hold over my head."

Lucius paused, and then reached for his teacup again. Draco tried idly to decide if that was to give himself something to do with his hands, or to hide their shaking, but gave up. The decision was made much harder by the fact that it could have been either.

"Your mother did tell me that you were committed to this absurd course of being with Potter," Lucius whispered. "May I ask why?"

Draco eyed him musingly and then nodded. "Of course."

He waited. Lucius waited. Only when Draco smiled at him did Lucius hiss and say, "I am asking," throwing every word at Draco as if it was a separate stone.

"I got into what I did on the Continent because I was bored," Draco said. "Summoning me back to England doesn't stop that. Nothing can stop it except something to *do*. And, forgive me, Father, family business and the management of money doesn't excite me that way. Not that you made a single effort to bring me into the management of the Malfoy fortunes," Draco had to add, as he thought about it. It seemed Lucius, and perhaps his mother before she thought more about it, had assumed that Draco would be happy to settle into the role of an idle heir without doing anything that heirs traditionally did.

"What can Potter offer to relieve your boredom?" Lucius whispered. The whisper disguised whether his voice was hoarse or not. A pity, Draco thought. He would have enjoyed knowing if he was affecting his father that way. "He is the most boring of the boring, the staid, conventional Gryffindor."

Draco gaped at Lucius, and then began to laugh. He did try, in deference to the family and his mother if not Lucius, to keep the snickers down, but the higher-pitched giggles escaped despite himself.

"What?" Lucius had drawn himself up into that immovable marble statue pose that he so favored.

Draco choked and wiped some more tears away from the corners of his eyes. "You don't know much about him if you think that, Father," he said, and licked a little at the tears trickling down his face. "Did you--did you really think that the man who won the war and conducted the most arrests of any Auror in the British Ministry of Magic in the last four years couldn't keep me *entertained*?"

"Your mother has hinted at the latest form of that entertainment, and it will not last forever." Lucius leaned forwards like a hawk about to stoop. "What will you do when it is done?"

Draco wondered if his father and Harry would be flattered to know they had asked the same question, and decided that no, they wouldn't. Which might make it fun to tell Harry, anyway, later.

"When the chain ritual is done and all the animals are defeated?" Draco smiled a little at Lucius's baffled expression, which only proved that his mother had not explained *everything*. He lounged back in his own chair and took a slice of orange from his plate, wondering idly where Harry was. Perhaps he had decided to eat a meal that the house-elves brought him in his own rooms. Draco hoped not. He didn't want Harry to show such signs of retreat when they were on the brink of concluding a brilliant agreement. "Then I'll join him in his Auror work. As an unpaid and dashing exciting and random consultant, of course."

Lucius's jaw firmed. "The Malfoy heir cannot make his living in such a manner."

Draco gave his father another pleasant smile. Lucius had done him the favor of unsheathing his claws. Draco reckoned that he ought to do the same thing. "I had no intention of making my living at it. It is highly unlikely that the Auror Department will pay me for doing something they see as interfering in their investigations, anyway."

Lucius's lips shaped the silent question. Draco leaned forwards. "You will continue to support me in the style to which I am accustomed." Then he paused and considered that. "Well, the *money* of the style to which I am accustomed. I will have to provide the danger and the daring and the love for myself."

Lucius shook his head a little. He seemed to have regained some control of himself, maybe because Draco's rebellion had taken what he thought of as a familiar form. "What makes you think I would? I have told you the consequences of not obeying me, and this sounds as though you would not be obeying me."

Draco leaned back further and rubbed two fingers together. "Tell me, Father," he said. "Rather, answer the question that I asked you the last time you threatened not to keep me as your heir. Do you have another one?"

Lucius hissed at him. Draco shook his head. He had a lover--well, a soon-to-be lover--upstairs who could actually speak Parseltongue, and this effort was half-arsed at best.

"You don't understand," he explained to Lucius as gently as he could. "You can't threaten me unless you have someone to back me up as heir."

"It was meant--" Lucius shut his mouth.

Draco nodded anyway, understanding. "Yes, it was meant to make me crumple and yield to you. I know that. But that only works as long as I actually fear that you'll disinherit me. I know that's not true. You don't have anyone else who could take over the fortune. Hence your tolerating me doing what I want for five years, and only calling me back when you decided that you needed my help with your slipping chance of gaining power in the Ministry."

His father stared at him. Then he shut his mouth again--although his lips had only been parted a short distance, instead of gaping the way Draco had almost wanted to make him do--and he shook his head with a little snort. "You have a good brain," he said. "Why can't you use it in a way befitting the Malfoy heir?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "You realize that you still haven't actually told me what I did that was so disgraceful?"

"Not taking things *seriously*," Lucius snapped. "Not living up to the responsibilities that you should willingly have taken up years ago."

"I would have taken them up if I'd had any indication that you wanted to share them," Draco said blandly, meeting his father's eyes. "I didn't, and you were willing enough to pay for me and not see me. Why should I have thought you were anxious to call me back home and share the power behind the throne?"

Lucius shook his head. "Regardless of what decision you make, you should know that Potter is an utterly unacceptable consort for a Malfoy."

Draco smiled. "Why, Father, I thought *you* were the one who said that Malfoys set the standard of what is and what is not acceptable. If I begin to say that he *is*, then others will have no choice but to follow along with me. Isn't that what you believed?"

Lucius shoved his chair back and left the room without a word. Draco chuckled and watched him go.

He saw a shadow of movement at the other end of the room, and turned his head back, wondering if Narcissa had come to congratulate him.

Harry stood there, staring at him.

Draco raised his eyebrows. If Harry had any questions about what had happened, about whether Draco would stick by his side for Harry's own sake or if he was only defying his father, Draco would be more than happy to explain. But he put his hand out, and Harry came and took it.

"I didn't know you would defy him for me," Harry said, and kissed the back of his hand.

Draco half-shut his eyes. This kiss burned more than the ones they had shared last night, more even than being allowed to touch Harry. Harry had touched him, and of his own free will.

It was--important. It was something.

But at the moment, Draco could come up with nothing more worthy to show his deep emotion than to stand up and kiss back.

## The Green Dolphin

"Oh, Harry, I didn't realize what a lovely holiday spot you had in mind!" Draco gushed as they Apparated in beside an ocean.

Harry glared at him, but Draco felt free to ignore him as he looked approvingly around. The beach wasn't the most beautiful one he had ever seen--not a patch on some of the Mediterranean beaches he'd been to--but it was a vast improvement over the swamp where the leopard had lived. A curve of delicate, grainy white sand, like scattered sugar, sloped down beneath a curl of headland towards a sea, blue-white and studded with foam.

"This is nice," Draco declared, and breathed in deeply, rejoicing in the smells of salt and spray that traveled to his nostrils. "Which means you can stop trying to glare my head off," he added.

Harry sighed and strode to the edge of the headland. There was a series of shallow steps carved into the stone, Draco saw now, invisible from most angles except right on top of them, leading down towards the ocean. "You haven't realized what it means yet? That you'll need to fight a creature that lives in the water? I doubt you'll be as good at that as you were at fighting beasts that live in the sky."

Draco sneered and followed him. "I think that between us, *we* can come up with a way to fight the beast."

Harry blinked and glanced over his shoulder at Draco. "Of course," he said a moment later. "Of course we can."

Draco watched him thoughtfully. Harry was negotiating the sliding last part of the path, where the steps faded into sand. "Second thoughts?" Draco asked. "Or the chain ritual reasserting itself now and taking over your mind?"

Harry jerked his head back towards him, slid on the path, and had to flail around indignantly with his arms for a moment. Draco caught up with him and balanced him with an arm around his waist and one around his shoulders. Harry tried to pull away as he stood back up, but Draco leaned in and kissed him soundly on the nose.

"What are you *doing*?" Harry pulled back and shook his head. "You *do* realize that when we face the dolphin, we have to be serious?"

"It is a dolphin that lives here?" Draco looked out over the ocean and nodded. He could see that, that this peaceful place was home to a beautiful and peaceful creature. "Well. We'll face it." He faced Harry again and smiled at him. "But for now, I'm reminding you that you *do* have a choice about what to do and how to do it. And that you can't be serious all the time. And that not even half an hour ago, you were kissing the back of my hand."

It took a moment, a long, wavering moment during which Draco wasn't sure if Harry would listen to him or not, but then Harry bowed his head and his forming scowl melted into an easy smile. "All right," he said softly, taking Draco's hand and brushing another kiss in the same place he'd put the first one. "I can't demand that you change your tactics in the middle of the hunt." He faced down the slope and shivered. "But I'm nervous."

"Because this is the hardest one?" Draco asked as he rested his hand on the small of Harry's back and guided him gently down the slope.

"Because this is the *last* one," Harry said, and darted one glance at Draco before he returned all his attention to the path.

Draco decided that paying attention to the path might benefit him, too, with the way all the sand slid underfoot, and they came down gently on the beach beside the water, after all. The water curled away in front of them, up and down, jade-colored now that Draco was closer. The noise it made on the beach wasn't a noise Draco would have expected from the sea, either, more like a whispering song than a simple hissing.

"Where is the dolphin?" Draco asked, turning his head so he could survey the whole expanse of the ocean, out to the horizon. He knew better than to ask where they were. The other places either hadn't been real or had been a combination of reality and glamours that made it impossible to find them once they had killed the creature that inhabited it. "And do you know what its power is going to be?"

Harry didn't answer. Draco glanced at him to find his hands fixed in front of him, his eyes fixed on the waves.

"Hey," Draco said softly, and put his hand on Harry's rigid, tensed arm. "I'm not angry at you for having a bit of doubt."

Harry took a deep breath. "I know you were right, now," he whispered. "A chain ritual that left me so open to my enemies is no defense." Draco nodded. He could live with that being Harry's sole acknowledgment for right now. He *wanted* more than that, wanted Harry to confess that he couldn't live without Draco, that the chain ritual had been wrong because it would have killed the fire inside him and made it impossible for him to be with Draco, but that could wait for the future. "But I still keep wondering what I'm going to do about Dark Lords after this. How to stop the rumors and the rituals and everything else."

"Remember that the responsibility is shared," Draco said. "Speak to your friends. Speak to the other Aurors who helped you work those cases. Speak to me."

Harry turned his head and stared at him, so astonished that Draco sniffed. "What?" he asked. "I told you that I would enjoy appearing alongside you, fighting, and then Apparating away again before anyone could stop me. And it's not like I'm interested in a paid position at the Ministry."

"But fighting Dark Lords," Harry whispered. "It's a *serious* task. Are you sure that you would want it, even for my sake?"

Draco smiled and laid a hand on Harry's cheek. Harry's eyes were so *wide*. Draco thought he could happily drown in them and never come out again.

"I want it *because* it's for your sake," he told Harry honestly. "I wouldn't be interested in someone else offering me this position. I want to keep myself free from boredom, but this wouldn't appeal to me if you weren't at the center of it."

Harry swallowed a few times before he could answer. "And does that mean that you wouldn't want to do this if not for the history between us?" he finally managed to ask.

"What lies between us in the past is part of the reason you're so fascinating to me," Draco had to admit. "But, Harry, surely you know that I've come to appreciate you for other things? Your fire, your skill with spells, your courage?"

Harry blinked hard at the last words, and reached up to clasp the hand Draco had laid on his cheek. Draco tensed, but Harry didn't try to fling off his touch, as Draco had been afraid would happen. "My *courage*? I don't know where that comes into it. You've been railing at me for my stupidity most of the time that you've been working to destroy the ritual."

Draco clucked his tongue, but had to smile at the glare Harry gave him. He did enjoy baiting Harry like this, he had to admit. But it wasn't the only way they could interact, and Draco was glad of that. If it was, he probably *would* have had to part from Harry the minute the chain ritual was destroyed.

"You were brave to do this, even knowing in hindsight that it wasn't the best ritual to choose," Draco said. "And you flung yourself into helping me destroy these creatures the moment you understood what made the ritual worthless, when you could have dragged your feet or just waited for me to kill them. And you confronted your feelings for me, and my feelings for you, and let me touch you. I call that courage."

Harry lifted his lip in a gesture that Draco could only call a smile because he didn't have anything else to call it. "Do you think your own touch is so frightening, then?"

Draco touched Harry's hair, his face, his neck, wondering why he felt as if his hands wanted to tremble. "Not that, but the consequences," he said. "You were courageous to talk to someone who told you you were wrong. I don't think you've had that happen, a lot."

"Not since the war," Harry said, and the brightest smile Draco had seen from him yet came flashing onto his face. "Before that, they were quite eager to tell me so." He poked Draco gently in the chest. "And someone encouraged them to do it, if I remember who contacted Rita Skeeter."

Draco said nothing to apologize for himself. If Harry hadn't already forgiven him for that, Draco thought they probably wouldn't be standing here. He turned his head to the side and fluttered his eyelashes instead. Harry smiled at him as if helplessly, and Draco kissed him on the nose again.

"Now," Draco said. "Over your attack of nerves and ready to hunt?"

Harry nodded with his eyes half-closed as he turned away and began to walk along the beach. "Thank you, Draco."

*I've never enjoyed someone speaking my name so much,* Draco thought, and for a moment, he wanted to seize Harry and practice some of the activities that the beach was very much unsuited for.

He settled for taking Harry's hand, squeezing, and saying, "You're welcome."

\*

They arrived at last at the place where Harry thought the dolphin was likely to be: a wide bay, filled with water so transparent that Draco could see the seafloor of white sand, and how it sloped out for a short distance and then dropped off even more steeply than the cliff above them did.



Harry cast a spell Draco didn't know, and stood frowning into the water as it sparkled and then died on his wand.

"The spell should have brought the dolphin close enough that we could see it," Harry muttered, peering around as if he thought it might have surfaced near him and he just hadn't realized where it broke water. "I don't know why it didn't."

"I might," Draco said, and cast one of those spells that Veronique had taught him and he wasn't supposed to know. Not because it would bring disgrace or scandal on the Malfoy name, but because he had spied on her when she was using the spell to cheat on him, and she would have been humiliated if she knew. Now he watched as a trail of light formed on top of the water, like a reflection from a second sun, and nodded. "I thought so."

"Well?"

Draco grinned and glanced over his shoulder at Harry. Harry really *was* so much more interesting when he had some fire and snap in his voice, although Draco could imagine what Harry would say if he voiced the opinion.

"The spell I used detects magic from a ritual," Draco said. He ignored Harry's mutter about how useless that would be when the whole place was infused with power from the chain ritual. "It can reveal when a ritual is closing back in on itself and getting ready to fight someone who wants to disrupt it, too. And the chain ritual's beasts have probably decided that you're their enemy, and won't obey a summons from you."

"The wolf had decided that, yes." Harry stood back with his arms folded. "But I don't know what other spells to try. I doubt that you're as good at swimming as you are at flying, and we can hardly force the dolphin to come to us."

Draco sighed. "Honestly, you've suppressed your imagination along with everything else. We *do* have something that can force the dolphin to respond." He took the silver rose out of his pocket.

Harry glanced back and forth between the rose and the water, and then shook his head. Draco thought he would say something about the rose's inability to make the water obviously boil and bubble, but instead he murmured, "What would I do without you?"

Draco grinned as he bent over the water. The rose was no weight at all, and he held it straight out in front of him, perhaps a meter above the waves. "Go back to being the self-sacrificial person who created the chain ritual?" he asked, in a little mutter he knew was obnoxious.

Harry rolled his eyes, and probably would have said something else, but the water erupted just then.

Draco jerked his hand away in time not to feel anything but the mere scrape of pointed teeth on the back of it, but that was quite enough. He watched in awe as the dolphin jackknifed in front of him, rolling over in the air like a Quidditch player, and then splashed back down and swam a distance away.

It was as green as jade, a color that deepened to blue on its flippers, nose, and tail. When it rose again, lifting its head out of the water to glare at them, Draco was sure that the color was no illusion. It was more beautiful than the quartz wolf or the silver horse.

*I'm going to regret killing it, aren't I?*

If he *could* kill it. The dolphin was swimming back and forth, just above the part of the bay where the water would have been shallow enough to strand it, its tail lashing. It made sharp, angry chittering noises, and Draco could imagine all too well what would happen if he was foolish enough to step into the ocean now.

"Any suggestions?" he asked Harry.

Harry said nothing. Draco glanced at him and saw that he was grinning slightly at Draco, his head tilted to the side in a way that made Draco want to kiss him. But indulging that desire right now might get slightly complicated, with a magical beast nearby that wanted to kill them. Draco waited instead, and Harry finally shook his head and muttered, "I told you, I don't really know what to do. You're the expert here."

Draco took a step back and watched the dolphin. It lifted its head and chittered at him again, a sound that was *not* ridiculous and which had all the right in the world to make him jump back. Harry didn't have to chuckle at him when that happened, either. Draco continued to watch the dolphin measuringly, and finally nodded and decided that he was ready to begin.

"The silver rose is the weapon that's supposed to defeat it, somehow," he told Harry, raising his wand. "Bringing the rose closer to it can't be a bad thing."

Harry opened his mouth, obviously about to ask how he planned to do that, but Draco cast the Chasing Charm--the Reverse Summoning Charm--before he could. The rose soared into the air and hung there like a much smaller version of the cloak in the swamp for a few seconds, glittering. Then it darted towards the dolphin.

The dolphin dived, but the rose didn't need to breathe, and promptly sank under the surface, too. For a few seconds, Draco could see their chase, gliding and zooming all over the shallow part of the bay. Then they moved to deep water, and with one more flash of jade from the dolphin's tail, they were gone. The rose faded into the distance as effectively as a dolphin colored more like the sea did.

"Well, well," Harry drawled, and made a show of dusting his hands. "A brilliant plan. What happens now?"

Draco lifted his wand and shook his head. "You really *have* suppressed your imagination," he said. "Well, again, I assume that the Aurors have a regime that induces conformity." And he swished his wand down. "*Accio* rose."

There was a disturbance in the ocean, and the rose dipped into sight, then dipped down again. Draco squinted, trying to make out what was keeping it. Despite the distance, the water was so clear that he thought he would have noticed something like a reef or an enormous tangle of seaweed by now.

But the rose sagged into the waves once more, and then suddenly soared upwards, giving itself a little shake as if it had decided that it was going to return to the one who had called it no matter what.

The dolphin's teeth were clenched on the fragile silver petals and stem, almost bending them out of shape, and the dolphin flew towards Draco, tail and flippers fluttering as though it still swam.

Draco had about two seconds to conjure a net in front of him, and he did, but not before the dolphin slammed into him. The net wrapped around it seconds later. The dolphin thrashed on top of Draco, sleek, wet body strong enough to crush the breath out of Draco's lungs, and squealed into his face.

*The net's stopping it, but not for long*, Draco thought, and seized the rose in one hand, determined to smash into the dolphin's face and find out whether that would work better.

Then Harry cast a spell from the side, aimed straight at the dolphin, and the air was rent with lightning, clear and white and utterly blinding Draco.

*Trust him to get involved, when he does*, Draco thought, dodging the teeth of a predator he could no longer see, *with the* wrong spell.

## Malachite Eyes

Luckily, the lightning spell seemed to have stunned the dolphin as well, because for a second it lay still on top of Draco, its mouth slightly open and its eyes seemingly blinking. Or so Draco thought, through the few, faint shadows he could still see when Harry's spell had taken most of his sight.

He heard Harry gasp, and then Draco was dragging the remnants of the net over the dolphin's head and drawing them as tight as he could, trying to regain his breath as well as his freedom of action. The dolphin could start lashing again any second, and he wouldn't be prepared.

Sure enough, teeth flashed past his wrist, and Draco only got his hand free because he heard it coming. He tumbled to the side, swearing steadily at Harry all the while, and heard Harry's horrified apology. Draco shook his head as hard as he could and rolled away from a strike of the dolphin's powerful tail.

"Find out what the rose does!" he bellowed, and he thought he managed to make at least a little sense, because he heard Harry fumbling for something, and then casting a Summoning Charm.

After that, most of Draco's world became the desperate flailing, splashing, sliding mess on the beach, and the morass of mud that the water was turning it into. The dolphin kept squealing and lunging at him, but it was lunging towards the water at the same time, probably panicked to find itself stranded. Draco kicked it when he could, although he thought his blows had little impact on those sleek sides, and above all concentrated on keeping his head and hands out of its jaws.

At least his sight was starting to come back, if slowly. He wanted to yell at Harry again, but he could hear Harry casting another spell, and this one couldn't be as ill-judged as the one that had blinded Draco.

Draco *thought*. He hoped that Harry, along with Draco himself, was remembering that the dolphin, like the leopard and the wolf, was probably immune to most direct magic.

Harry finished the last syllable of his incantation on a rapid hiss. Draco heard another hiss from overhead, and looked up to see the silver rose hovering over their heads. Its stem had twisted into a long noose, and Draco grinned. He didn't know if the rose had done that itself or Harry had modified it, but it didn't matter. He *liked* it.

He began to maneuver the dolphin beneath the noose. It wasn't easy, even though they were pretty high up on the shore now and the dolphin was slower than it had been, panting and lashing its tail more feebly. Draco thought the dolphin probably knew instinctively what the rose did and didn't want to go near the bloody thing.

*Too bad*, Draco thought, and drove the dolphin to the side, then corkscrewed his body after it and wrestled it up the beach. *You still hold a piece of Harry's heart, and that means you have to die, no matter how beautiful you are.*

The noose was only a few paces behind the dolphin's head now, but it brought its beak sharply forwards, and Draco had to duck as the teeth ripped towards his forehead. That propelled him face-first into the sand. By the time he could raise himself up and look again, the dolphin was already halfway back to the ocean, using its tail to scoop up sand and shove its body, jarring and jouncing,

down the slope.

"No, you don't!" yelled Harry, and finally jumped into the battle. Literally, Draco saw after a moment of staring. He was shoving the dolphin, steering it furiously away from the water, towards the noose again.

The dolphin focused on him, and froze.

For a second, anyway, but it was enough time that Harry could put his back and arms into the push and get the dolphin almost directly under the noose. Draco snapped out of his trance and swirled his wand, manipulating the noose lower, until it hooked over the dolphin's head and around its neck.

The dolphin thrashed again, and Draco reached out and tugged Harry back. Harry came willingly, his eyes wide as he stared at the dolphin. Draco remembered what he had said about fearing the end of the hunt for the creatures, and squeezed his hand, trying to convince Harry without words that he would stand by him beyond that end.

If it came. Draco had expected the noose to start working the instant the rose was attached to the dolphin, but the beat was still gasping and dragging itself in the direction of the sea. Draco shot a questioning glance at Harry, and met a wide-eyed one and a shaking head in return.

"As far as I know, this is what the rose is supposed to do," Harry shouted into his ear, since the dolphin's squeals were too loud for them to just speak normally. "I cast a single spell at it, and the stem unfurled."

Draco opened his mouth to answer, and then cursed and rushed after the dolphin as it managed to thrust its nose into the water. He didn't care anymore what had been *supposed* to happen. What mattered was that the dolphin was getting away.

Just as he caught up with it, the dolphin slid down until its dorsal fin was almost submerged, and turned sideways, churning up the slope of the bay as it fought towards the place where the sand dipped into deep water. Draco tried to catch hold of the tail flukes, but they slapped and stung his fingers, preventing him from getting a grip. It looked like there was only one real possibility.

He grabbed the floating silver rose, and cast a Sticking Charm on the hand that had grasped it. Then he reached for the dolphin's dorsal fin with the other.

At the same second, the dolphin reached the end of the sand that had grounded it, and struck forwards with head and tail and flippers and everything in it for the open water. Draco felt his feet dangling.

"*Draco!*" shouted Harry. He must have cast the Bubble-Head Charm that surrounded Draco's head, because Draco was too much in shock to do so.

Then they were underwater.

Draco held his breath before he remembered that he didn't have to, shook his head wildly, and managed to accept the air that the Bubble-Head Charm provided to him. The water was just as pretty beneath the surface as above. That wasn't Draco's problem with where they were going, really: into the deep sea, where Harry wouldn't be able to easily follow them.

And Draco was riding a dolphin who had already provided that it had resistance to most forms of compulsion or magic that Draco might have tried.

*Fucking fantastic.*

But Draco had been in harder situations—negotiating with a few of his lovers, for example, or the time that one of his spells to improve a broom had gone wrong and he found himself plummeting towards the ground from eighteen hundred feet above—and survived them. In the end, this dolphin was simply a conjured animal from an object, probably a part of a plant, judging from the color.

So, as the dolphin traveled deeper and deeper, to the point that Draco felt pressure building around his body and he was starting to lose sight of the dolphin's color as the jade water darkened to black, Draco reached down, got his other hand on the silver noose around the dolphin's head, and *yanked*.

The dolphin surfaced with an indignant squeak and circle of bubbles. Draco smiled, braced his heels on the dolphin's back, and glanced back at the shore to wave at Harry with his free hand. The other was still bound to the rose with the Sticking Charm.

Harry was running back and forth on the sand, his eyes frantic, his hands waving in the air. Draco doubted that he was just waving back for pleasure's sake, but he had no idea what he was supposed to do. He was busy enough as it was.

The dolphin got its breath and dived again. This time, Draco was ready for it, and he had another idea. He got his heels into the proper, different places, and gathered up the loose tendrils of the silver rope. Then he used them like reins, kicking the dolphin at the same time and yelling helpful advice that it probably wasn't going to pay attention to.

The dolphin's drumming tail flicked over its back and nearly hit Draco in the head. Draco ducked and yanked on the noose again. "Turn!" he shouted.

The dolphin paused for a few seconds, floating in the water. Draco crouched still further and got as much of a grip on the noose as he could. It was much less slick than the rubbery skin on the dolphin's sides.

Then he saw the extent of the creature's murderous plan. The dolphin began to dive once more, and this time it ignored every single pull that Draco could throw into the mix. There was nothing to do but ride it out.

But he *couldn't* ride it out, that was the problem, Draco told the part of his brain that had plotted that strategy. Sooner or later the dolphin would dive deep enough for the pressure to injure Draco. Or maybe it was aiming for a special rock or reef where it would scrape Draco off.

The streak of water past its flippers, the click and chatter of its teeth, and the rapid darkness and cold gathering around him made it hard to think of an alternative plan. But once again, his native genius came to his rescue, and made Draco remember how the wolf and the leopard had both been vulnerable to magic that didn't aim to directly injure them.

He drew his wand, taking his right hand from the silver rose with extreme caution. But the dolphin didn't pause. It had made up its mind and wouldn't change it now.

Draco conjured a Bubble-Head Charm around the dolphin's head.

*This* time, the dolphin paused. It shook its head. It raised one flipper and scraped at the smooth exterior of the bubble. Draco smiled and shook the reins again, murmuring a suggestion for speed in any direction.

There was speed, all right.

Straight up the dolphin went, back towards the surface, squealing in indignation, its tail churning the water to whiteness and foam. Draco swayed backwards and at one point completely off and flailing, as he would be if he was riding that falling broom. But he had got back on the broom, and he did the same thing with the dolphin, flinging one leg over its sleek side.

They exploded through the surface with a force that nearly did tear Draco loose. He clamped down more with his hands, this time using a Sticking Charm on them both. He doubted any more magic would settle the issue. From here on out, it was just him, wrestling the dolphin.

The creature spun and danced, reared on its tail and leaped for the sun, turned around and tried to bite him. But the reins were too tight for that, and Draco only had to haul on them to discourage the dolphin. It resumed trying to introduce his skull to the seabed in short order.

Draco laughed aloud as they broke the surface again, in a dazzling spray that filled his eyes with light as the sun leaped from the drops. He couldn't see Harry, but he was sure he could feel him watching, from the direction of the shore, and that was gift enough.

"Draco!"

He *could* hear Harry shouting, distantly, given the obvious limitations of the Bubble-Head Charm. Draco turned his head, seeking, but the dolphin plunged stubbornly downwards again, and swimming bubbles interrupted Draco's vision.

But the spell that heated the water around them, and filled it with beams of light to counteract the dolphin's dive, proved Harry had decided on the right enchantment at last.

Draco could see now, and he could hear the dolphin squealing in pain; the same small change of heat in the water did it far more harm than it did Draco, since it needed to stay cool. Once again it shot towards the surface, and this time Draco felt free to murmur the *Finite*, ending the Sticking Charm that kept his hands on the noose, and carefully draw his wand with one hand.

As the dolphin surfaced and thrashed, head twisting back and forth as though spotting its enemy on shore would allow it to escape this torment, Draco cast the spell that filled the Bubble-Head Charm with water.

The dolphin began to squeal again, hard and sharp, and tried to dive. Draco leaped off into the water this time, and barely ducked another clap by that great tail. He knew that the dolphin would drown, especially since Harry boiled the water beneath it again and kept it from diving it to the depth where it might have managed to pop the charm on a rock.

The dolphin lifted its beak above the surface, and Draco took pity and added more water, so it would drown faster. There were still several convulsive jerks and shakes before its body went limp and drifted on the waves, the silver rose bobbing and trailing above it like a balloon.

Draco started to wade out to retrieve whatever the dolphin would turn into, but a much more

powerful glow than he had ever seen before surrounded the conglomeration of them, dolphin and rose and charm. For a second, Draco did think that he saw a small strip of green plant melting out of the dolphin's body. Then the mixture soared into the sky, a glittering, turning miracle of light. It was white, but shot through with silver, and the green of the water. Draco stood in front of it, frankly staring. He felt Harry come up beside him, but neither of them said anything, simply watching in appreciation.

And, Draco had to admit, the feeling that it was the end of an era.

Harry put his hand on Draco's arm. Draco turned and caught his hand, kissing the knuckles and then the fingers. Harry shivered a little, and opened his mouth. Draco found himself leaning forwards, swaying a little on his toes as he waited to see what Harry would say.

As it turned out, he wasn't to know.

The light flew over to him, surrounding his head like a halo. Harry jerked his head up with a gasp. Draco tried to reach for him, but his hand collided with the edge of the light as though it were a Bubble-Head Charm.

Harry stood there with his hands drumming on the light, and Draco drew his wand and circled around him. He dismissed his own Bubble-Head Charm and started casting all the hexes and charms he knew that could disperse this magic.

Nothing worked. Draco, his heart beating and his palms sweating, wondered for a wild moment if the end of the chain ritual might kill the one who had created it, even though he had never heard of a chain ritual that did that.

Then the light calmed, and dropped away from Harry. It formed into long, trailing chains and then small, barreled things instead, and Draco realized that there were two glass keys lying on the sand, one near Harry's feet, one near his. He picked his up, dazed. It was beautiful and delicate, loops and flutes and swirling barrels.

He looked up in time to see Harry watching him with a half-crazed smile. His eyes shone from inside. Not jade and not emerald, Draco thought, staring at them, though in his time he'd heard bad newspaper articles call them both. No, instead these eyes were malachite, harder and a more complicated shade of green, with glitters and glimmers of blue inside them.

Not Harry's eyes. More like the dolphin's eyes, but in Harry's face.

"Did you think there would be no guardians for the last piece of the heart?" Harry whispered, in a rasping voice that Draco could only imagine Harry having after years of smoking. "For the heart itself?"

"I thought you would come with me and we would retrieve it," Draco said, his voice so blank that he realized after a moment he was telling the truth. He couldn't really think of anything else to say.

Harry tossed his head back and laughed. It was a horrible laugh, probably the worst one Draco had ever heard. He bit the inside of his cheek and refused to react, because he knew that was what Harry wanted. Or the thing that lived inside Harry wanted.

"You'll never find it," Harry whispered. "He was the only one who could have guided you, and you'll never find it."



Draco was growing a little calmer now—in fact, calmer all the time. It made sense that something else was growing inside Harry’s mind, since it had referred to him as a separate being. He refused to look away from those malachite eyes, but he moved his hand to the shaft of his wand.

“Why is this so different from any chain ritual I’ve ever heard of?” he asked. “They don’t do this.”

Harry smiled, or the thing inside him smiled with his lips. “A ritual that could only be performed by a slayer of Dark Lords,” it murmured. “That must mean that someone with a close connection to Dark Lords came up with the ritual in the first place, no?”

*A Dark Lord, Draco realized. Probably as a twisted form of revenge.*

“But no one could say that he was not warned,” said the thing, and smiled complacently at Draco. “You even tried. I owe you something for that.”

Draco didn’t wait around to hear more about what kind of punishment it intended to give him. He whipped his wand out and shouted, “*Accio* keys!”

The glass keys leaped straight at him, into his hands. Draco snatched them out of the air and whirled around, Apparating without a second thought. The creature roared behind him, but the sound was cut off as Draco Disapparated.

*Maybe you’re going to punish me, Draco thought as he landed inside the Manor’s wards, but you’ll have to catch me first.*

## The Transparent Keys

“So Potter turns out not to have been good for you after all.”

Draco didn't lift his head from the book he was studying, a book he had got out from his parents' library on possessions and the best way to remove a possession connected to a ritual. So far, he hadn't found anything connected to chain rituals yet, but he still had half the book to skim. “Go away, that's a good father,” he murmured.

Lucius prowled further into the sitting room Draco had chosen, staring at him. Draco studied him critically. Lucius's pale robes and pale coloring and the silver cane he had chosen for today contrasted *horribly* with the dark blue of the walls. He looked like a drifting smear.

“When someone is hammering on my wards,” Lucius said, his voice lowering, “I think it fair to deduce that the relationship has gone awry.”

“He hammered on the wards once before,” Draco replied, turning back to his book. “I don't remember you being compelled to comment on it then.”

“He had not then spent a night under this *roof*,” Lucius's voice rose.

“I didn't know roofs were so important to you, Father,” Draco nodded to him with a pleasant smile. “I'll be sure to think of that in the future, and be careful who I invite to sleep under them, lest I offend you. Would a tent out in the gardens under the stars be more to your liking?”

Lucius almost snarled at him. Draco leaned back in his chair, keeping his place in the book with one finger. He should have known that dismissing his father wouldn't be as easy as that, he thought, but—and he wanted to whine this to himself—it *should* have been that easy. Lucius should trust him enough to leave him alone, especially since he knew now that his threats to disown Draco and his attempts to cow him wouldn't work.

“You will tell me what happened,” Lucius was attempting to strike the Haughty Lord of the Manor pose that had worked so well when Draco was a child. Draco wasn't impressed. For one thing, Lucius was no longer that much taller than he was, and for another, Lucius couldn't send him to his room without supper, either.

And for another, Draco now knew how much of the money and time and effort and politics keeping his family afloat in those years had been his mother's.

“Fine,” Draco said. “We completed the chain ritual, killing its last animal component, and then Potter became possessed by something that seems to be a consequence of the chain ritual. The ritual was made *by* a Dark Lord to trap Dark Lord slayers, it seems. Potter wants to kill me and stop me from figuring out the best way to get his heart back to him, while I want to find out what's possessing him and scare it away so that I can have my Harry back.” The whole speech and the effort he had put into it, so that he could tell Lucius what was going on without rendering himself too vulnerable to his father, was worth it when Lucius flinched at the words “my Harry.” “Satisfied?” Draco added, and turned back to his book.

Lucius wasn't satisfied, because he didn't leave, but on the other hand, he was silent while Draco

worked his way through two pages more of the book's dense recommendations for allaying possession that happened as the result of *finishing* a ritual. Draco shook his head impatiently and paged on. No, he had thought this section would have something, but it didn't. He should have remembered that, given the keys and the fact that they hadn't recovered the physical object Harry had used to substitute for his heart, it wasn't actually finished yet.

"I might have something."

Draco glanced up. "Something for what?"

Lucius had taken a seat across from him. He waved his wand, and the color of his robes darkened a little, which meant he had *finally* noticed the way he clashed with the room. Draco supposed he had to award him a point for that. "Something to end the possession and make the ritual yield." Lucius was speaking gently, frowning at a point past Draco's head, the way he often did in theoretical discussions. "Particularly if this ritual was designed by the Dark Lord. I have—I found something after *he* left our Manor for the last time."

"We don't know for sure that the ritual was designed by the Dark Lord," Draco pointed out, because all this meant was that his father hadn't been listening, and Draco wanted to make sure that he did. "It could have been anyone. Harry found the book in a thief's hoard. It could have been another Dark Lord."

"Nevertheless," Lucius replied, and stood up, walking to the doorway. Draco couldn't imagine what his father might have found that he thought would help, but he went back to his book.

Only after a few seconds did he become aware that Lucius hadn't left the room, but was standing in front of the doorway, staring towards him. Draco sighed and marked his place in the book with a finger again. "What?"

For a moment, he thought Lucius would puff up and tell Draco to speak to his father more respectfully, but in the end, he only shook his head, sighed, and said, "If I help you, then you will owe me a favor."

"No," Draco said. "I won't disinherit myself, and I won't stop seeing Harry. If those are going to be your conditions, then you might as well not help me at all."

Lucius looked as if he would like to clap a handful of nails to his forehead, because it would hurt less than having a disobedient son. Then he turned away with a noise of disgust, shaking his head. "Very well," he said over his shoulder. "If I cannot have what I want in one way, I will get it in another. But I will still fetch what I found."

Draco grunted and went back to his book. What he found continued to be useless. All of the rituals in the book were assumed to be performed with the help of another person, or from a reputable book, or they were easier to disrupt and break. There was nothing there about someone alone performing a ritual that had been designed by a Dark Lord out of a book that no one knew anything about and sensible people would know not to trust, and then having to kill magical creatures to break down the ritual's effect.

*Of course not. Because this is Harry we're talking about.*

By the time Lucius came back, Draco had nearly forgotten him. He had found a few notes that would help, or at least that might help if he could combine them and get ready to break the ritual

that way. He glanced up as his father walked in, carrying a black trunk banded with silver and with a black lock on it.

Draco immediately drew his wand and checked for curses, but found only defensive spells. “The Dark Lord left that behind?” he asked, tucking his wand away. “It seems rather large to forget.”

Lucius shot him a withering look as he lowered the trunk to the floor. “This is only what I stored it in when I discovered that the book corrupted every book on the shelf beside it,” he snapped, and set about casting the counters for the spells that guarded the trunk. The main lock itself must have been a spell, because it melted into air a few seconds after Lucius began to cast.

“Corrupted them how?” Draco bit his lip to keep down his chuckles at the vision of the Dark Lord’s book whispering naughty tales at nighttime to other books on the shelf.

“Turned them to grey slime,” Lucius said shortly, and stepped back as the trunk’s lid fell slowly and majestically open.

Draco blinked and took a step back himself. He reminded his racing heart that this could be like the blue book that Harry had got the chain ritual out of, and that he shouldn’t hope too much.

Lucius floated the book into the air rather than touching it. After a look at it, Draco understood why. The book’s “cover” was really multiple strips of skin, all bound around each other to contain the pages inside. Draco recognized Ashwinder skin, and a long strip of molted green that had probably come from the Dark Lord’s snake, Nagini. Not to mention other colors that looked a bit more human.

“How are you going to open it?” Draco asked. The book bulged so much that he thought flinging open the skin would scatter the pages all over the floor, and Draco didn’t particularly want to touch *them*, either.

“Watch and learn,” his father said smugly, and waved his wand at the book, intoning a spell so soft-voiced Draco couldn’t hear it. Draco scowled at his father’s profile. *Spoilsport*.

The strips of skin unfolded, peeling back as though something with claws had gripped them and pulled. For a moment, they fluttered raggedly, and then the pages spread out along them as if arrayed on the top of a desk. Draco had to nod grudging praise. His father’s ego was big enough and really didn’t need any more stroking, but it was true that Draco hadn’t heard of that spell and never could have performed it himself.

Lucius studied the pages, using his wand to move the ones he didn’t want further and further along the strips of skin, now unfolded to their fullest extent. Draco caught a single glimpse of the snaky writing, in a rust-brown color of ink, on the nearest parchment, and turned away. He had seen that enough during the year of hell that he’d received courtesy of the Dark Lord. He didn’t need to see it again.

It seemed to take forever for Lucius to make an enlightened noise, but when he did, the sound burned and sizzled along Draco’s nerves. He turned around and flung his arms across the back of the chair, waiting.

Lucius came towards him, a strip of skin that looked like an Ashwinder’s trailing next to the page he had found. “Read this,” he said to Draco, whirling the page towards him and casting another spell that magnified the writing.

Swallowing, and deciding that he would go away after this mess was done with and perform a different rebellious act each day for ten days to get the sting of obedience out of his throat, Draco leaned forwards and read.

*...In my genius, I have discovered that a ritual might be turned on its caster at the end, if an enemy attempts to dispel it, by making that enemy himself part of the ritual's continuation. This is an unparalleled discovery, never made before in the history of wizarding kind. If it had been, I would surely have run into it...*

Draco skimmed the next two paragraphs, all the Dark Lord's nattering in praise of his genius, and shuddered. The truly disconcerting thing about the wittering on the Dark Lord did was the insufferable arrogance of it all, and as a connoisseur of arrogance, Draco had a lot of samples to compare it to.

He arrived, finally, at what he was looking for, and what *had* to be the thing his father had located and thought could help.

*...The caster can escape only if another ventures in his place to destroy the caster's tie to the ritual.*

Draco sat back with a small frown. Did that mean he would have to take Harry's place as guardian of Harry's heart? That wasn't a solution, because it meant Draco was just waiting around to be killed or dissolved himself, and Harry remained ready to collapse into an emotionless automaton at any moment now.

Then he smiled, and jumped to his feet. "I know what it means," he said aloud.

"That you will slaughter Potter because you refuse to sacrifice your life?" Lucius asked hopefully.

Draco sighed and glanced at him. "Poor Father," he said, mildly enough, he thought. There was no reason for all that bristling Lucius promptly did. "It rankles you, doesn't it, that I managed to escape from the clutches of the Malfoy family and establish myself as an independent person, and you never did? I found those old journals, you know, the ones you wrote when you were my age and fulminating against Grandfather Abraxas. You should have continued the trend. You would be a better person today." He paused, considering the stiff way his father stood, and added, "If only because you'd be more relaxed."

Lucius tried to say something, but outrage had stifled it to a death rattle in his throat.

"No," Draco confirmed, taking the glass keys from his robe pocket and studying them thoughtfully. He had believed it was useless trying to find the keyhole they fit, because he had to find some way to break the possession on Harry first.

But it made sense that the possession was part of the chain ritual itself, to make Harry into a guardian for the last important object—the equivalent of the tooth and the bit of beak and the keys themselves. The ritual had to have an end somewhere, and that meant a final object. If Harry was a guardian now, what was he guarding?

*His heart.*

Draco had to find the object Harry had bathed with his blood and stored his heart's emotions in,

and destroy *that*. Go around the guardian, not through him, because Harry wasn't like the other guardians.

"How do you know anything about what I wrote?" Lucius whispered.

Draco stared at him blankly, not understanding for a moment what he was talking about. Then he sniffed and waved his hand. "You're not the only one who can look around the house for interesting artifacts abandoned by a previous owner, Father."

"I am *not* the previous owner. And neither was the Dark Lord," Lucius added, which was a less than impressive addition given that he had already swollen up like a toad.

"You're previous because you've ceded power to me as your heir, and you can't take it back," Draco said, turning his back and walking out of the blue sitting room. His father followed him, promptly blending in a little better with the décor. "And you made the Dark Lord owner when you swore allegiance to him and gave him the ability to take over the house of anyone with the Dark Mark."

Lucius spluttered behind him, noises that Draco didn't have to pay attention to, such as "Dark Mark" and "impertinent brat" and "getting another heir." Draco knew that last would never happen, both because the threat had worn out already, as he'd told Lucius this morning, and because his mother loved him and Lucius couldn't actually make a new heir by himself.

He glanced at the glass keys in his hand again, and then out the window at the nearest wards. They bounced and shimmered under Harry's assault, but his mother had strengthened them the other day, and there was going to be no more buckling and shattering. No, Draco didn't fear that Harry could get through.

At least, not without an invitation.

Draco grinned. It was going to be risky, but what was life without risk, as he observed aloud to his father a moment later?

"*Life*," snapped Lucius.

Draco laughed, and sprang lightly down the stairs.

\*

Cutting a small hole in the wards from the inside was child's play. It took longer for Harry, or the monster that inhabited Harry's body and turned his eyes the color of pond scum, to notice and charge towards him.

Draco lifted the glass keys and then one leg, as if he would break them over his knee. Harry jerked to a stop, staring at him and huffing.

"So," Draco said, smiling at him. "You know that I was trying to keep one key from you? And that you need one?"

The monster inside Harry didn't dispute that. It just made Harry's head bob, its eyes fixed on the key that Draco had Summoned from in front of it.

“Well,” Draco said. “I’ve decided that I’m tired of putting all this time and effort into destroying the chain ritual, and getting fucked over by Harry’s bad decisions in turn. So you can come and take the key, *as long as* you take it gently from my hand instead of snatching it or hurting me, and Apparate to whatever you need to guard right after.” He let his lower lip tremble. “I think I’m owed that much tenderness after what I did.”

The guardian hovered for a moment, and Draco wondered if it would believe him. But it did, the same way Harry had believed him and answered him honestly when Draco had asked him what the chain ritual did. This was a trick by a Dark Lord, after all, meant to destroy the Dark Lord destroyer, not actually preserve his life.

The monster came forwards and gently laid its hand on the key. Draco sniffled. But the monster kept its word, and lifted the key from Draco’s hand without scratching or otherwise hurting him.

Draco nodded. “Good-bye,” he said.

The monster nodded, and started to turn to Apparate.

Draco promptly leaped after him and seized his arm.

The monster was Apparating before he realized what Draco had done. He had Harry’s quickness of action and Harry’s lack of foresight, Draco thought smugly. As they disappeared, the monster Side-Along Apparating him without meaning to, the monster’s roar of rage had to cut off, but Draco’s thoughts didn’t.

*And the one who thinks is the one who wins.*

## The Black Stone

They came out in an underground chamber; Draco knew it must be that, from the dim light. The guardian in Harry's body immediately tried to swing on him and cast a curse that, from the sound of it, would probably have disemboweled Draco and made him trip over his own intestines.

Draco had a constitutional objection to that. He flipped away and down, and found that he was falling off a small ledge, or rise in the stone, into a sheltered alcove at the bottom. That, he had no objection to.

On the other hand, the guardian seemed to know this cave better than he did, and a flying spell shattered the overhang above him, the lip of stone he had fallen over. Draco dived for new cover. There were sliding things beneath his hands that he didn't think were stones, but he didn't have the time to pause and investigate them to see what they *were*.

He rolled down a pile of the loose and bouncing things, and ended up in another hollow. This cave was made of malleable stone, he thought, sitting up and trying to catch a glimpse of the larger cavern so that he would know where to go next.

It was black and grey stone, streaked here and there with white, and the floor dipped crazily up and down, ledges climbing almost to the ceiling, the hollows sloping and arching, sometimes leading down to side tunnels that Draco thought it would be worth his while to explore. The only light came from a far-distant tunnel that probably led to the surface and the faint *Lumos* on the end of Harry's wand. Draco promptly lit his own, and the shadows in the cave retreated and became a little more manageable.

"You don't know what you're doing."

Draco looked up. The guardian stood above him, on the upper slope of the cave. Its head shook slowly from side to side, as though it was irritated by stinging flies, and it hadn't taken its eyes off Draco yet.

"You don't know the kind of danger that you're in because you're trying to take Harry away from me," Draco replied in kind, and forced himself back to his feet. His hands and knees stung from all the rolling and dodging, but he couldn't pay attention to that right now. He had to look for the object that represented Harry's heart, to find and destroy it, so that Harry's emotions could go free once again.

"You could leave," said the guardian, making a single long stride towards him. The movement almost comforted Draco, because he knew it was the kind of step that Harry would never take. That proved that it wasn't him looking through his eyes and talking to Draco at this moment. "No one need know about this. I'll let you go free, the way that you wanted me to a few minutes ago."

Draco looked up at the guardian and sniffed. "Did you really believe that little ploy? It was just a ruse to get you to take me to your lair."

The light of his *Lumos* had spread enough by now to let him see all the corners. As he had thought, the litter that had tumbled away beneath him wasn't stones. Nor was it bones, which Draco had been more than half-afraid of. It was coins, Galleons and Sickles and others that had crests Draco



didn't recognize, and thought were probably Muggle. Here and there, trunks lay with other treasures spilling out of them. Draco recognized a harp made of dragonbone in one corner, heavy and black.

*This is the thief's hoard that he took that book with the chain ritual in it from.*

Draco didn't know where his intuition came from, but he didn't need to, either. He knew it was right, and that was enough for him.

He flipped around and regarded the guardian. It had come down towards him while he was distracted, and Draco wasn't fooled by the way it froze on the slope of the stone and tried to look innocent.

For some reason, though, it still didn't want to attack him outright and force him from the cave. Draco found that curious. What was it protecting?

*Its heart.*

Draco was sure that was it. The guardian was a clever last step in the chain ritual, but it was still the last one. If Draco slipped around it and destroyed the object, then that was the end of it, and Harry would be free to return to himself. It paid for the guardian to treat Draco cautiously, to get him out of here without him destroying anything if it could. And it had already seen how stubborn and skilled he was. Simply launching itself at his head and hoping to win the ensuing battle wouldn't be a smart tactic.

"You could leave," repeated the guardian, its voice low and tempting. Draco wondered what had told it that this was a temptation that would work, though, because it certainly wouldn't. "I wouldn't pursue you."

Draco smiled at it. "Well..."

The guardian let its eyes brighten. But once again, it wasn't the way Harry's eyes would brighten, and that was more than enough to keep Draco at his task and make him finish it.

"No," Draco said, and cast a spell at the coins. They rose in a shower and whirled around the guardian, striking it and making it yelp and shield its head.

Draco scrambled to his feet and ran towards the back of the cave, towards one of the side tunnels. Nothing he had seen yet looked like a candidate for the object Harry had enchanted to be his heart. Yes, there was no reason that it couldn't have been one Galleon among the others, thus making it harder to find, but Draco didn't think Harry thought that way. All the objects he had enchanted into animals had been ordinary ones, with the possible exceptions of the silver spoon and the golden nugget, and even then, Draco thought he had mainly chosen those because he wanted all the animals to be of different colors.

*You'd still think he could have found something that wasn't pink, though,* Draco thought, as he dived out of the treasure chamber and into a side tunnel.

This one had bones, human ones. Draco looked away from them and up to the sides and the ledges near the ceiling. One way or another, those bones couldn't help or hurt him anymore, and that meant they weren't his problem.

One ledge held something long and flat. Draco squinted. Might that thing be a box or a trunk? Yes, he thought it highly likely that in fact it was. He reached out and lifted his wand, wondering what would happen if he Summoned it.

A weight crashed into his back and bore him to the stone. Draco rolled away immediately, kicking, and heard a grunt as his foot landed somewhere soft and vital.

Draco suppressed a wince as he stood. *Sorry, Harry. But by the time you need that operational again, you'll be back with me, and I'll help you all you need with any injuries you have to repair.*

He stood and saw the guardian staring at him, bent over with one hand cupped to its groin. Draco shrugged, and wagged his wand. “*Accio* thing up there!” he yelled.

The box on the ledge tilted over and began to fall, and Draco saw that it was bigger than he had thought, made of glass. It had something inside it, something smaller than most of the treasures in the cave, and round. It bounced wildly, indicating that it wasn't secured.

The guardian tried to knock Draco out of the way and take the box in its arms. Draco barked authoritatively, “Fool! You'll break the glass, and then where will we be?”

The tone made the guardian hesitate, and in the meantime, Draco cast another Summoning Charm and the box zipped over to him. Draco picked up a rock from beside him and smashed in straight into the box. The glass cracked and crazed, dropping and scattering at his feet. Draco leaped back and saw what was inside it for the first time. A black stone, glowing dully red but otherwise as ordinary as the object he had thought Harry might choose.

He caught the guardian's eyes as it stared back and forth between him and the glass. Draco shrugged a little. “Oops?” he offered, and then snatched the stone and sped further on into the tunnel. Trying to get back past the enraged guardian to the main chamber would be suicide right now.

It might be suicide *anyway*, Draco realized, seeing the way the tunnel bent to the side up ahead. There were no footholds here, and it looked as though the cave either stopped completely or plunged down into a hole. There would be no ladder in the hole, of course.

Draco drew a loose thread hanging on his shirt rapidly looser and waved his wand over it, chanting. In seconds, he'd Transfigured a rope. He turned around and swung it at the guardian's feet, forcing it to leap back.

*It doesn't often go for Harry's wand*, he noticed. Like the other animals who had guarded the next key of the quest, he thought, it was more used to fighting physically.

And some time in the near future, Draco would need to steal back the glass key it still clutched in one pocket.

Thought became action, and Draco lashed again with the rope, tangling up the guardian's foot as it tried to rush at him again. This time, Draco yanked the rope tight, and the guardian crashed to the floor. Draco winced for a moment, but he believed the key was enchanted glass, and not likely to crack simply because of an impact. He held out his hand and barked authoritatively, “*Accio* key!”

The guardian's pocket swarmed and struggled as though he was keeping a mass of bees in there. Draco rolled back as a fist came dangerously near his own ankles. But he had his hand out and

above that, and the key slammed into his palm so hard that it jarred his teeth. Draco smiled at it and cast another spell that tangled the rope around a stalactite, heaving the guardian off its feet to dangle in the air.

Draco took his own key from his pocket and knelt down beside the stone. He hadn't needed the keys for the box, which left the stone as the last possibility.

Yes. There were tiny cracks in it, when he stared at it hard enough. Draco would have thought they were scratches if he had seen the stone in strong light and not known what it was. Now he knew, or thought he did, that they were keyholes.

He thrust in with both keys at the same time, and missed. They jolted and scraped on the stone. Above him, the guardian roared and thrashed, and Draco heard the sound of cracking rock. The thing about being good at physical fights and not magical ones was that you might have the physical strength to escape magical traps.

He forced himself to narrow his gaze on the cracks in the stone and nothing else. There was no one coming after him. There was no one who would force him to defend himself. He held out his keys and slid them into place, one above the center of the stone on the left side, one below that on the right.

There was a ringing sound that made Draco's heart leap into his throat for a single instant, because he thought he had broken off one of the delicate flutes or barrels on the glass. But then the keys slid home, and the stone twisted and wrenched open, delicately pulled, more delicately than Draco had thought was possible, by the gripping force of Draco's hands on either side.

The black stone unfolded like a flower, and in the center was something that shone red and gold, something so beautiful and delicate that Draco found it hard to look at it directly. He thrust out a hand blindly in its direction instead, and his hand curved around the warmth. That was all it was, mere warmth, no solidity, no substance, just heat that danced and blazed through his fingers.

This was Harry's heart.

Draco cupped his other hand around it as he stood up, fearing that the warmth might be blown out like a candleflame. He had no idea if that was true, and no desire to test it. He simply cradled the beautiful thing against his chest instead, and hunched his shoulders protectively closer when he heard the roar behind him. He couldn't turn and face the guardian for long moments. This was so glorious that he wanted to hold it forever.

But he knew he couldn't. What had to happen instead was the restoration of the heart to Harry—and what a fool he had been to give it up, Draco thought distractedly—and then Draco doing his damndest to capture Harry's heart for himself after that, in one way or another.

He turned around and thrust his hands out. The guardian was right in front of him now, eyes open wide and crazed.

Draco leaped at him. He didn't know what he was going to do when he landed, only that he had to keep his hands out and make sure that he ended up putting the heart in the right place.

Where the right place was, and whether he could actually let go of this brilliance when the time came, he couldn't ask himself.

The guardian danced back from him, and its eyes were a little less crazed. It glanced from Draco to the cracked halves of the black stone, and made a harsh whining sound, a noise of unmistakable loss.

“You know it’s over,” Draco told it softly. “The object you were supposed to protect is gone, and what purpose do you have now? There’s no reason to think that I’ll let you continue as you are even if you flee. Why not help me and let something good come out of all this senseless death and destruction?”

The guardian wavered in front of him, and took a step forwards. Its hands were still raised as if it would claw out Draco’s eyes, but Draco had no fear of it now. Not with all its resistance to magic, not with the resemblance it had to Harry without *being* him.

He held Harry’s heart between his hands, and that was more than enough reward for him.

The guardian opened its mouth. Draco didn’t know what it would have said, because suddenly he knew the right place to put the heart beating between his palms, if not what would happen as a consequence.

He leaped up and crammed the heart down the guardian’s throat.

The guardian choked and brought its hands up to knock him away. But Draco hadn’t engaged in all those athletic pursuits in the last few years, in and out of bed, without acquiring the ability to dodge. He did it, evading the blows, and continued to stuff his hands down until the red light leaking from between his fingers turned a different color.

And until he met some warmth at the bottom of the guardian’s throat that mingled with what he held, and exploded in soundless golden and red flames, and pushed him back. Draco raised his head, shaking it, and stared at the guardian.

The guardian had dropped to his knees, his hands rising to either side of his face, and he appeared to be silently screaming, although Draco only knew that by the movements of his mouth. And then he took a deep breath, and lifted eyes that were Harry’s again.

Draco only had one chance to see them undimmed, before Harry began to weep. His tears poured down his face, unceasing, accompanied by gulping sobs. Laughter was breaking free of his throat in the same instant, laughter that Draco thought would sound mad to most people.

But *he* knew what it was. There was still part of Harry’s heart that had been locked away in the stone until Draco freed it, and part of him, meanwhile, that had been dimmed and muted. With his heart back inside him, the tempest of his unexpressed emotions had burst in on him all at once. He was probably crying as he realized what a fool he had been and laughing because he remembered all the humorous things he had done, Draco thought wisely.

Draco knelt and extended his hands towards Harry.

Harry might have recoiled, remembering what Draco had done and seeing those actions for the first time with absolutely clear sight. He might have turned away, his attraction exposed as something else now that he had his emotions back, and Draco would have had to accept that.

Instead, Harry hurled his body forwards and leaned his head on Draco’s shoulder as he settled against him. His hands came up, not to push Draco away but to draw Draco’s arms in around

himself.

The grip was desperate, fierce. And then he fell back to sobbing and laughing again, while Draco stroked his back and murmured nonsense words into his ear.

After a moment, though, Draco retrieved his wand and conjured a handkerchief for Harry. There was fondness and pride and gratitude and relief that Harry had come out of his emotionless state at last, and then there was letting Harry get his shoulder all wet and snotty.

## A Golden Ending

“I can’t believe how stupid I was.”

Draco rolled his eyes a little and lay back on his bed with his arms behind his head. He had once dreamed of hearing Harry say that, but the fiftieth time he repeated it in two days, it got a bit old. “I know,” he said. “But that’s past and done now, and any time you feel the urge in the future to be as stupid as you were then, just come and talk to me. I’ll stop it.”

Harry, lying near the foot of the bed with Draco’s feet on his stomach, started and looked at him. “You’ve done so much already,” he mumbled. “I don’t want to put you to more trouble—”

Draco seized Harry’s hands and pulled him up so that he was draped across Draco’s stomach. That drove the air out of Draco, but Harry was the one who whoofed in surprise and lay there blinking at him.

“I think your sense of humor is taking the longest to recover of anything you muted with that chain ritual,” Draco told him in exasperation. “It was a *joke*. Of course I would hope that you feel you could ask me for help, but I’m also willing to be at your side for your own sake. Remember that.” He yanked Harry’s hair for emphasis.

“Ow,” Harry said meekly.

Draco then used the hold in Harry’s hair to pull Harry up and kiss his lips, and Harry went along with *that* plan much more enthusiastically. In fact, he melted all over Draco like candle wax, sighing and kissing into his mouth, and Draco had to push him back a little to hear steps outside the door.

There was a pause, and then a brisk knock. “Draco? Harry? May I come in?”

Harry pulled back from Draco so quick that it felt as though his stubble burned the sides of Draco’s mouth. Draco grumbled at it, shook his head, and reached for Harry’s hand, holding onto it when Harry tried to get off the bed in a panic. “Listen, it’s my mother,” he said. “She knows perfectly well what we’ve spent the last few days doing.” He raised his voice. “Lean in at the door only, Mother. That’s all I feel like tolerating right now.”

Harry stared at him in amazement, but Narcissa smiled in perfect understanding as she opened the door and stuck her head into the room. “I wanted you to know that dinner is being served in twenty minutes, dear,” she said.

“You could have sent a house-elf announcing that,” Draco pointed out, entwining his fingers with Harry’s and petting his hand. Harry finally gave up on trying to get loose, although he lay there and eyed Draco’s mother as if he thought that she would object to him corrupting her “innocent little baby.”

“True, but I wanted to say it so I could hear what you’re going to do to your father,” his mother agreed, totally unrepentant.

Harry tensed again, but Draco widened his eyes at her. “Why should we do anything? Don’t you

think he's going to torment himself enough when he sees us come down to dinner holding hands?"

Harry turned his head and gave Draco another look of wonder. Draco smiled back at him, shaking his head slightly. There was no reason for Harry to be so surprised that Draco would champion him. Even with all his emotions back, he seemed to believe that this interlude was only a dream, and Draco would wake up tomorrow morning and decide that he wanted to be the prim and proper Malfoy heir, with no lover, that his father would have valued.

"Never," Draco whispered to Harry, not caring that his mother could overhear. "I'm never going to abandon you."

Harry closed his eyes once, then turned his head to Narcissa and said, "Do you think there's a serious chance that Lucius might grind all the enamel off his teeth just watching us sit on the other side of the table?"

Draco knew his mother, and he saw the light start behind her eyes, running down her face to pool in her smile. She didn't put one hand over her mouth to hide it, and that said more than anything else about how much she had accepted Harry into their lives.

"It might happen," Narcissa agreed gravely. "I'm not sure that's something you should care about, though, given what he has done to you."

Harry half-shook his head. "I wouldn't want to give him expensive dental bills. Clearly we should do something else than just come down to dinner holding hands."

"You're right," Draco said, touching Harry's back gently. He would have liked to do something else, but in front of his mother, it was the only visible sign he felt like giving of the wild explosion of delight that filled him when Harry showed he had his sense of humor fully back. They could do the other things later, when his mother was out of the room. "I think we should *start* there, but not end it there. Spill your drink during dinner, Harry. Then, because my father won't want us wasting more wine on you, you'll have to share my glass."

Narcissa laughed in the way that Draco had rarely heard her laugh, a soft and delighted, liquid chuckle. "And I think Harry should complain of tiredness and not having the strength to lean all the way to his plate," she said. "It's understandable, after all, considering what he's been through in the last few days." Harry opened his mouth, no doubt to say that Draco had done more, but Draco pinched the back of his hand, and Harry ended up grinning and staying silent. "So Draco has to feed him with his fingers."

Harry fell back as he laughed, and Draco put a hand in the middle of his stomach, stroking, smiling at his mother. Narcissa understood the message—that they didn't need any more help planning—and smiled back as she left.

Draco waited only until the sound of the door clicking shut before he pounced on Harry, and they mingled laughter and plans for the dinner with kissing and other things that neither of his parents needed to know about. Although they were more than free to *suspect* them.

\*

"That was stupid."

Draco leaned against the wall and sighed. He had agreed to let Harry speak to his friends alone,

because Harry insisted he should, and that had seemed best when neither Weasley nor Granger would welcome Draco. But the last thing that Harry needed to hear, over and over again, was how stupid he had been. Granger had said nothing else for the last twenty minutes.

They had sent Draco out of the room—even Harry had agreed to that, though with shadowed eyes—but Draco was leaning against the wall outside and listening with the charm that made a special section of wall thin and dull. Draco thought Harry should face his friends himself, especially since Draco *still* didn't know what they had said to him in their last argument. That didn't mean he wanted to have no idea what they said to him in *this* argument.

"I know it was."

Draco widened his eyes and shifted his stance so that he could stand there more comfortably without revealing to anyone that he was listening. At last Harry sounded as though he wanted to do something more than stand there and let his friends heap hot coals on his head.

"I know it was stupid," Harry continued, and his voice was low and charged. There came a sound as though he had pushed back from the table that Weasley and Granger had in that room, and begun to pace back and forth. "But I have to get past that at some point, and start thinking of something else."

"How never to be that stupid again?" Draco heard a noise he suspected was Weasley shifting his chair around.

"Exactly."

Silence from the Trouble Twins. Draco rolled his eyes. They hadn't expected agreement of any kind, it seemed, and they hadn't expected Harry to be able to move on. Draco thought that was foolish of them. Harry was stupid in the way that he didn't anticipate consequences or look at things with foresight. He wasn't stupid in the sense that he couldn't learn better, once the mistake was pointed out to him.

*Many times, admittedly.* But Draco had done some of the work that he suspected Granger usually did, in pointing out that mistake to Harry, and Harry had now finally reached the point where he didn't need to hear it anymore.

"How are you going to make up for it, Harry?" That was Granger, a click following her words, as though she had rested her elbows or her teacup on the table.

"Not make up for it," Harry corrected her. "I think I already did that in helping Draco fight down the creatures that made up the chain ritual." He ignored or didn't feel the silence that Draco could hear following the declaration of his name. "Make sure I'm not that stupid again. And I'm going to hunt down Dark Lords and fight them the way I should have been all along, not try to come up with some way to get rid of them forever that won't work anyway."

"But what happens if something goes wrong?" Weasley demanded. "It already did, once, and you didn't have the sense to come to us."

Draco decided that was so perfect a cue that he would just have to reveal that he had been eavesdropping, rather than stay out of the conversation. "That's where I come in," he said, and flung open the door.



Granger and Weasley turned around and gaped at him, even though Draco thought Granger was some kind of magical genius who was supposed to make sure that Weasley didn't do things like that or something. Harry was the one who rolled his eyes and shook his head. Apparently he was resigned to the fact that Draco would always do things like this.

'Were you *listening*?' Granger demanded, firing up so quickly that Draco decided the genius reputation wasn't undeserved. Just the quickness reputation. Granger probably achieved very good results when she had weeks to work.

"Yes," Draco said, and turned to Harry. "You won't be fighting Dark Lords exactly like before, or exactly the way you should have all along. If you'd had the sense to avoid doing the chain ritual, you and I would never have known what we could be to each other. And think what a *waste* that would have been."

The way Harry's eyes warmed and softened, the way he crossed the room to take Draco's hand and kiss the back of it, made up for any distress that Draco might have suffered at the sight of Weasley and Granger's dropped jaws and widened eyes. Though, in truth, there wasn't much distress at that, so in this case, Harry's gesture added to the pleasure instead.

"How can you put up with him?" That was Weasley, shaking his head and considering Draco from head to toe, as though the secret was written on his skin.

Draco smiled pleasantly at him, while Harry sighed and leaned his head on Draco's shoulder. "It's easier than you'd think," Harry muttered into Draco's neck.

"It's a secret that you don't need to know about," Draco translated for Harry's friends, putting his hand on the nape of Harry's neck. He paused thoughtfully. "Unless you regularly share secrets with each other about your sex lives."

"Merlin, no!" Weasley flushed so hard it looked painful.

"Good." Draco nodded. "Because I think that you have enough rows without adding jealousy into the mix. What?" he added, as they all glared at him.

Harry's glare melted, but Weasley and Granger's stayed. Draco grinned and settled down to charm them. That, at least, he was good at.

\*

"This way!"

Harry was shouting as he raced down the darkened tunnel ahead of Draco, aiming at God knew what beyond. Draco tossed his hand forwards and illuminated the tunnel with a single thunderclap of light, the *Lumos* charm raised to a level that Louis had taught him. Harry looked back and nodded once.

That would be why he missed the Stunner headed for his chest, because he was too busy looking back and thanking Draco. Draco rolled his eyes and raised a Shield Charm in front of Harry to deflect it. He could have used a more powerful spell, but Harry would kill him if he used Dark Arts on an investigation, and Draco hadn't managed to train him out of gratitude yet, so it was this or let him get Stunned.

Harry swung around, reinforced Draco's shield with his own just as another Stunner cracked into it, and roared a name that Draco couldn't understand, probably the name of the puny Dark Lord they had come hunting. Then he took off running again. At least this time, he wouldn't trip on any hidden wards or holes in the stone.

Draco followed, hotfoot, and sent a seeking spell ahead to tell him how many wizards were there. The second Stunner alone argued that this particular insane Dark wizard had more followers than they'd thought.

Draco was looking forward to taking him down. Insane Dark wizards offended him as a matter of principle. If you were going to be Dark, you shouldn't be mad. Did this idiot *want* all the Light wizards to think that Dark wizards only fulfilled stereotypes?

But apparently a lot of them did, because they kept letting down the side.

The seeking spell came back and told Draco that it was a large cavern ahead of them, with five wizards in it. The cavern floor dipped up and down, resembling the one that Harry had hidden his heart in, and two of the wizards were hiding in side tunnels that wormed and branched off the main one, and that Harry probably wouldn't even see before he ran straight into the heart of the trap.

"Five!" Draco yelled, and when Harry didn't turn around and Draco couldn't be sure he'd heard, he conjured a flashing blue number 5 in front of Harry's eyes. Harry nodded once, but didn't look back this time, proving he *could* learn. Harry ducked ahead of Draco, rolling, and Draco followed him. Another three Stunners crashed overhead and earthed themselves harmlessly on the stone.

Draco popped up before Harry did and sent another spell into the main cavern. It probably wouldn't affect the insane wizard, whose perceptions were already confused, but it would Confound the ones right next to him, and make them infinitely less dangerous. Draco whirled to the side and jumped down into the cavern, already plotting how to deal with the wizard in the left-hand tunnel.

"Draco!"

That was Harry, and his arm wrapped around Draco's neck and his weight bore Draco to the stone right before a purple spell that would have left Draco spitting up blood soared overhead. Draco nodded and patted Harry's arm to tell him he was all right, and in thanks. Yes, he could have survived that spell, and probably would have seen it coming in time, but it was bloody convenient that he didn't have to.

Draco shoved gently at Harry's chest, and Harry let him go and stood. Then he faced off against the Dark wizard in the middle of it all, a pale fellow who had already done some damage to himself with rituals and spells, if the slit-pupiled eyes and long nose were any indication. There was probably going to be some dramatic duel, Draco thought, and he didn't want to be around for it. He slipped into the left-hand side tunnel.

The wizard there was so startled to be spotted that he dropped his wand and gaped at Draco, and Draco cursed him into submission and turned back to the main cavern.

He was just in time to see Harry conjure something that looked like a portable Shield Charm in front of him and sweep it around in a wild motion, at once reflecting a Stunner from the right-hand tunnel back so that it hit the witch who'd aimed it and catching the Dark wizard he was dueling beneath the chin. The witch fell over backwards, the Dark wizard reeled down and wailed, and

Harry bound both of them and Stunned the Dark wizard.

There was sudden silence.

Harry turned around and smiled at Draco. "Thanks for helping," he said, even as he went about binding the Confounded wizards. One of them was staring at his wand, and the other was making faces at a rock. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"You could have," Draco corrected him, approaching Harry and feeling the warm glow of pride for another person lighting him from within. It was such a strange sensation that he had to pause and bask in it for a moment before he was sure what it was. "It just wouldn't have been as easy."

Harry's smile softened. "It's good to know that you have that much confidence in me."

Draco stepped up to him and planted his hands on Harry's shoulders, kissing him. He had no compunctions concerning who would see him. No one around them was in a fit state right now to report on it later.

"You might not always make the best decisions," Draco whispered into his ear. "But no one can fault your courage, or your compassion, or your ability to make the best of it. And you can admit what you did wrong. Believe me, that's the most important trait you need to be a Malfoy's lover."

He stepped back, and Harry was beaming at him. There was so much in that smile. Draco reached up and trailed his fingers gently, tenderly, down Harry's face.

"Just don't make another attempt to hide your heart from me," he murmured, "and we won't have any problems."

Harry caught Draco's hand and kissed his palm. "I wouldn't be so foolish," he said simply. "Besides, it's not mine to hide anymore."

*And that, Draco thought, as he looped his arms around Harry's neck to kiss him again, is the sweetest thing that anyone's ever said to me.*

**The End.**

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